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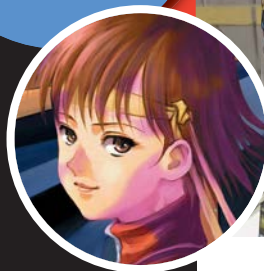
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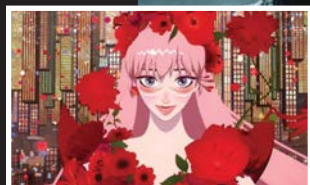
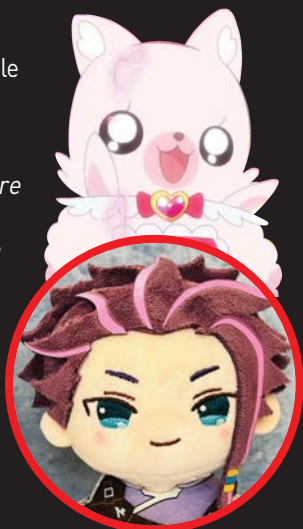
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PRETTY CURE

See how the Cure baton pass went this year at www.OtakuUSAmagazine.com!

ORBITAL CHILDREN

See more on what the director of *Orbital Children* was up to previously and why it's so acclaimed, only at www.OtakuUSAmagazine.com!

Rent-A-Girlfriend

As far as rom-coms are concerned, this has been one of our most anticipated! Follow the buildup as it went down at www.OtakuUSAmagazine.com!



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editorial

Sweet 16

Hey! This is Patrick and hey! Welcome to the latest issue of *Otaku USA* magazine! This one is super special, even by our standards, as these very pages you hold in your mitts mark the beginning of our 16th year of publication. That's right! *OTAKU USA* IS 16 YEARS OLD! They said it couldn't be done. They said it would never last. But here we stand, the last English-language magazine in the USA devoted to covering anime, manga, cosplay, toys, and games from Japan! How do we plan on celebrating? By doing what we've always done ... hunkering down and delivering a new issue chock-full of features and reviews.

So, what do we have in store for you this time? Well ... *Rent-a-Girlfriend* is our cover feature, and Brittany Vincent is here to tell us all about what to do when the feelings are real, but the dates are not (spoilers it's complicated). Up next, Kara Dennison graduates from an all-girls school for mecha pilots and gives us her two cents on *Gunbuster: The Movie*. Then, Michael Gold-

stein delivers a one-two punch with a pair of features from two anime currently rocking the streams on Netflix: *Penguin Highway* and *Orbital Children*. Finally, Kara Dennison brings it all back home her take on the with the candy-colored pure imagination of *Delicious Party Pretty Cure*.

In between these mighty big stories, you'll find our usual departments full of reviews and news about the latest developments in manga, cosplay, TV games, and perhaps even a giant monster or two!

So, what else is going on? Well, now as I sit here writing this, it's officially springtime in Tokyo. The cherry-blossom trees bloomed and did their thing about a week ago, and the sidewalks around the city are now looking very nice and pink. The weather is in a sweet spot between the chill of winter and the raging heat of summer, so if the world could just stay in this place forever, that would be awesome.

But time marches on, sometimes for good. In my case, that means that the release of my new book, *Crunchyroll Essential Anime: Fan Favorites, Memorable Masterpieces, and Cult Classics*, is just a few weeks away! Co-written by Samuel Sattin and featuring contributions from stalwart *Otaku USA* scribes like Joseph Luster, Kara Dennison, and Matt Schely, this book is, as the publisher puts it is, "an indispensable guide for anime lovers and fans, offering an entertaining and moving narrative about anime's true impact on pop culture. *Essential Anime* digs into the distinct stories of the creators and studios behind the making of these must-see anime titles, as well as the personal connections and importance they hold with anime fans around the world." I hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed writing it!

And that feeling is doubled for ol' *Otaku USA* as we embark on our 16th year of publishing. I really have to take a moment to sincerely thank our publisher for keeping the lights on over the course of any number of momentous events, our staff and writers to put the stuff on the pages for you to enjoy, and, of course, ... YOU! *Otaku USA* continues on and on until the break of dawn only because of your support! Thanks to everyone who reads our magazine, weather as a first-timer, or as a regular face around these parts. You keep picking us up, and we'll keep being here!

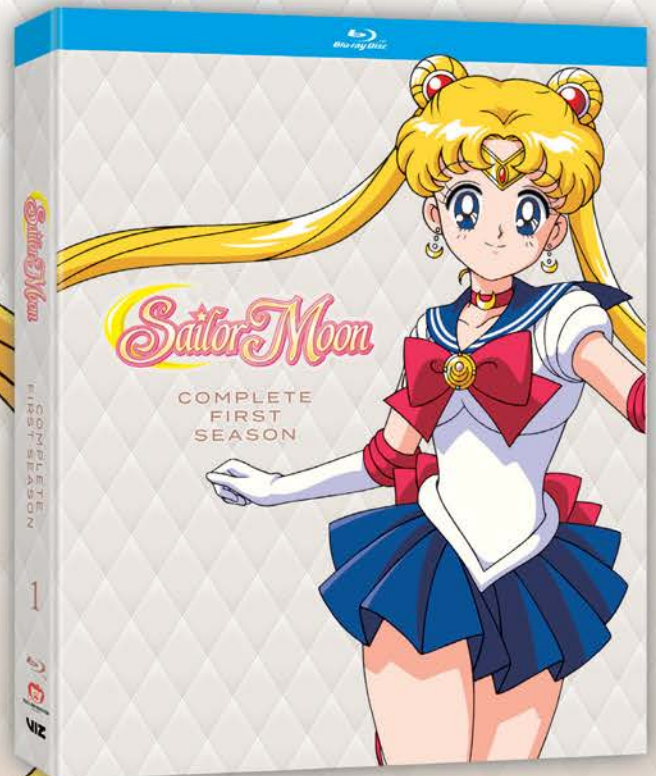
In the meantime, enjoy the latest issue of *Otaku USA*!

—Patrick



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Sailor Moon



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with Writer, Katsuyuki Sumisawa

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LETTERS/TEGAMI

Hey, hey *Otaku-USA*! HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YA! Wow, 16 years—you're almost old enough to drive! I've been a reader of your bodacious & bedazzling bi-monthly magazine nearly since day one, and a subscriber for at least half that time. THANK YOU for bringing us a decade and a half of amazing anime, magical manga, colorful cosplay, larger-than-life monster mayhem, the percussive panoply of popular J-music, and the electrifying voltage of various & vibrant video game reviews. Here's to another 15 years, cheers! Now go blow out your birthday candles and party like it's 2099!

Your pal, gogglefox

Hi gogglefox! Thanks so much for your letter, and here's a big fist bump right back at 'cha for the birthday wishes! 16 years sure is a milestone of sorts for our little magazine, and knowing that we're connecting to readers like yourself makes it all worthwhile! You keep on reading, and we'll keep on publishing! And now, if you don't mind our indulgence, here's a pic of our first cover, from waaaay back in August 2007. Enjoy!

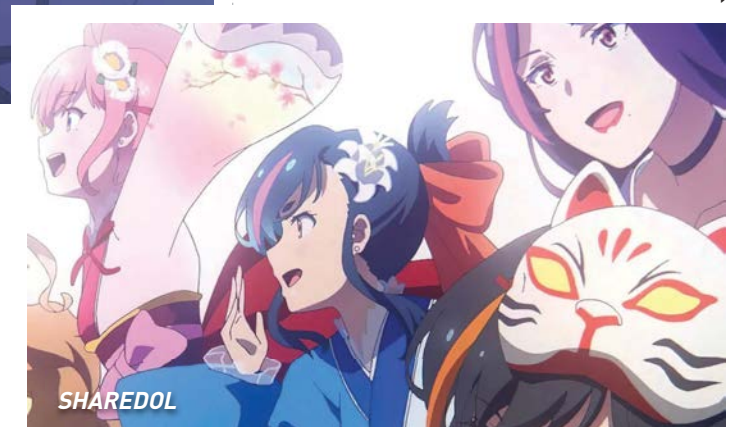


cate in your recent issue. And maybe I wasn't paying much attention, but there's one detail that the article overlooked. Komi grows a set of cat ears whenever she gets excited or caught up in the moment. Just a minor detail that I needed to point out.

I continue to look forward to more otaku related news in the future!

William

Hi William! Thanks for your keen observations and for correcting us about *Komi Can't Communicate*! We'll be sure to keep our eyes open for any cat ears that would otherwise elude us in the future. In the meantime,



here's a pic of Komi with her cat ears! Thanks again!

And there you have it ... more lucky letters rescued from the mail sack. Now give us more! Please send your questions, comments, queries, requests, and assorted ephemera to otakuusa@gmail.com!

Hello, *Otaku USA*! As always, thank you for doing a great job bringing us overseas fans great content featuring both the latest and oldest in manga, anime, and entertainment! Last night, I came across a very catchy video I believe is called *SHAREDOL*, a collaboration project between Toei Animation and the Sotsu agency. I believe it's a series about an idol group in Edo-era Japan, and I have to say it looks AMAZING, but there isn't much else on it. Is there an article in a previous or upcoming *Otaku USA* magazine that covers more? Or could you at least cover a little in the Q&A/ Letters section of your magazine? A small photo of the group there would also be greatly appreciated. As always: STAY AWESOME!

Best regards, David

Hi David! Thanks for your message and for

giving us the heads up about *SHAREDOL*! Indeed, we *did* find an article about it on our official www.Otaku-USAmagazine.com from October 2021. Right now, *SHAREDOL* is only a short pilot film on YouTube meant to gauge interest in a longer series. One thing's for sure, it certainly has *your* interest! By all means, take a look at the article on our site for more info! Now, as per your request, we've included a pic here on this very page. Thanks!

Dear *Otaku USA*,
I read the article about *Komi Can't Communi-*

TAKE TO THE SKIES!



At the end of a brutal war, countries dismantled their weapons. When the Gozareans attack, two pilots realize their trusty vintage fighter planes are the only means of combating the alien's powerful technologies. Hugh & Figaro are the world's last wings of hope.



JUNE 16, 2022

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Random Stuff for the J-Nerd Lifestyle

Adorable Adventure Awaits with Tales of Arise Plushes

If you'd like to fill your party out with the cutest adventurers possible, Kotobukiya has just what the JRPG enthusiast ordered. A

series of *Tales of Arise* plushes make their debut in Japan in April, with the six variations priced at ¥3,300 (about \$29) each.

Naturally, those six plushes are based on Alphen, Kisara, and the rest of the six core party members from the latest main-line entry in the long-running *Tales* RPG series. While they look like your average static plushes, you can move their limbs to set up a variety of poses, so they'll be ready for action no matter where you decide to put them on display.



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Let Psyduck's Sprayduck Teapot Serve You a Cuppa

Have you been wanting to turn teatime into something a little more Pokémon-themed? You'll get your chance soon thanks to a special Sprayduck-themed Pokémon teapot modeled after everyone's favorite stressed-out critter, Psyduck.

These porcelain teapots—which were handcrafted by Mino ware craftsmen—come with a stainless-steel brew basket. They're currently slated to go up for sale on the Ensky website in Japan in April, and you'll be able to pour your own cuppa right from Psyduck's mouth for ¥13,200, which adds up to about \$115.

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See the World Through Official Fate/Apocrypha Glasses

Anime and eyewear are no strangers to collaborating with one another, and the latest in this vein has *Fate* series home TYPE-MOON teaming up with Japanese lenswear company Eyemirror for a pair of *Fate/Apocrypha* themed glasses. These particular specs are based on Ruler Jeanne d'Arc and Saber of "Red" Mordred, and they are available for purchase at select Tokyo and Osaka locations as well as through the official Eyemirror online store.

Fate/Apocrypha illustrator Ototsugu Konoe had full supervision over each design, which feature symbols and other motifs inspired by each character's overall appearance and signature weapons.



The sets also come with an original glasses case complete with an illustrated cleaning cloth and special glasses stand. The price for all this? ¥18,700 (about \$162).

These Kirby and Waddle Dee Plushes Glow in the Dark, and We Need Them

The only thing better than a Kirby plush is one that glows in the dark, and Takara Tomy has not one, but TWO that can boast such an accomplishment. Both Kirby and Waddle Dee are comin' atcha in two different sizes—the big ones are ¥3,630 (about \$31), the little ones are ¥1,650 (\$14)—and pre-orders are open at the time of this writing ahead of a late April launch.

The Kirby and Waddle Dee plushes are part of Takara Tomy's new glow-in-the-dark merch line. Both versions feature an outer layer of fuzzy, pastel-colored material while the base fabric is made up of a special luminescent material. If you opt for one of the small ones, they come with a chain strap that makes them perfect for attaching to keychains or backpacks, and who better to travel with around town, or even around the world, than Kirby?!



Heroes Two!

It seems that everyone's favorite corporate sponsored superheroes, Tiger & Bunny, have returned to anime with a new season, titled appropriately enough, *TIGER & BUNNY 2*! And as part of the fun, the fine folks at Bandai's Tamashii Nations are rolling out a new batch of collectable figures to snatch up!

First up come a pair of Wild Tiger and Barnaby Brooks Jr. figures from the S.H.Figuarts line. Both include incorporation of clear parts for enhanced realism and include interchangeable leg parts, interchangeable hand parts, and special Tamashii STAGE figure stands.

Better still, these realistic, fully poseable figures comprise ABS, PVC, POM, and Diecast parts for enhanced detail and durability, fluid articulation and weight!

Meanwhile, the Fmini Line offers the main characters from *TIGER & BUNNY* 2 re-envisioned in a convenient and collectible palm size featuring lifelike eyes and simple articulation.

Standing at 90mm tall and featuring stands and optional arms, these squashed and stylish portrayals of both Kotetsu T. Kaburagi and Barnaby Brooks Jr. are sure to charm!

Visit tamashiiations.com for more info!



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Slow Loop

There's a lot of fishing. It's what pretty much everyone does.



STUDIO/COMPANY
Crunchyroll

RATING
TV-14

Families are weird, and not just in the general sense. They come in all shapes and sizes. They break and rebuild. They may not even know a lot about themselves from the inside. That's why shared hobbies and experiences are so valuable. They help you form memories and keep familial bonds strong in spite of any looming weirdness.

So, when *Slow Loop* says it's about fishing ... that's technically true. There's a lot of fishing. It's what pretty much everyone does. But it's about so much more than that.

Our protagonist is Hiyori, an only child whose late father taught her to fly fish at an early age. While killing time at the seaside before going to



bait and tackle shop while looking after her huge family (since her dad is normally out fishing). Later on, we meet Futaba, a grade schooler embarrassed for enjoying fishing "even though she's a girl," and her doting big sister Ichika.

Each episode has an outing of some kind, showing off the many kinds of fishing out there.



pretty nice to look at, too.

The hobby aspect is intriguing, and will reel a viewer in, but the family drama is where *Slow Loop* shines. It addresses subtler issues, especially for blended families, that often go unaddressed. Things like, for example, the fact that you can get along great with a new step-parent but still feel conflicted. Or the feeling of seeing a departed family member's room repurposed for someone new. The Minagi family is never unkind and has a less awkward start than many families in their situation might. But their communication improves over time, and it's heartwarming to see them grow more and more into each other.

If you're a person who bonded with a family member while fishing, whether on long weekends or at a pier on summer afternoons, *Slow Loop* has a comfortable nostalgia to it. Even if you and yours were never as

hardcore about your hobby as the show's characters, there are familiar moments. You, or someone you know, being terrified of bait insects. The sinking feeling of losing a fish. The exciting feeling of catching a fish ... and then trying to hold steady for your photo.

More than anything, though, it speaks to all sorts of families and friendships. It's not overly dramatic or action-packed (unless someone's got a good catch), and even the show's most unpleasant misunderstandings are handled with humor and compassion. You don't have to have ever held a fishing rod, or even care about fishing, to get something out of *Slow Loop*.

—Kara Dennison



dinner with her new stepfamily, she meets the excitable Koharu. The girls unexpectedly hit it off when Hiyori gives Koharu a quick fly-fishing lesson, then makes sashimi from their catch.

It's a good thing they hit it off as well as they do—because Koharu is, in fact, the stepsister Hiyori was gearing up to meet that night.

The series spins out from there, following three families and their relationships with fishing. The newly minted Minagi family, specifically stepsisters Hiyori and Koharu, work through memories of their respective late parents and bond over both learning to fish and later making that fish into gorgeous-looking dinners. Koi, Hiyori's childhood best friend, manages her dad's

But fly fishing is Hiyori's specialty, meaning it tends to be the focus, and the graceful loop of her fishing line as she prepares to cast serves as inspiration for the show's title. Naturally, as with any hobby show, we learn a lot about the different types of fly fishing, the artificial flies and what they're for, and how it differs from bait fishing. Even if you're not into fishing, seeing flies explained is pretty enlightening.

Unexpectedly, and rather nicely, it's also a very food-centric show. Whatever catches get brought home are cooked. That's Koharu's specialty. The recipes in the show aren't hyper-detailed but give interested chefs enough to go on. And the finished dishes are

Urusei Yatsura: Only You

A game of shadows



STUDIO/COMPANY
Discotek Media

RATING
13+

With the new *Urusei Yatsura* reboot TV series announced this year as the 45th anniversary approaches, I hope U.S. streaming platforms will make available the original breakout hit from Rumiko Takahashi that helped define much of what's associated with the phrase "1980s anime." *UY* was, after all, translated and released in the U.S. decades ago in its effective entirety. For now, at least the six standalone movies are streaming on Crunchy-



roll, both dubbed and subtitled, with Blu-Rays courtesy of Discotek Media dipping their toe into the electrified waters. As series introductions go, they're not ideal, since none offer exposition (indeed, many work as finales!) and half are very surreal and melancholy; a deviation from the wacky hijinks romantic sci-fi comedy Rumiko Takahashi created. But the first film, 1983's *Only You*, released just before Valentine's Day, is most emblematic of the phrase "*Urusei Yatsura*: The Movie," and why Rumiko Takahashi considers it her personal favorite *UY* film.

Fundamentally, *Urusei Yatsura* is a zany spin on centuries old Japanese folk tales. When Earth is invaded by Oni aliens, for the sake of a global armistice the most lecherous, most unlucky, and most hilariously unsympathetic teen in the world Ataru Moroboshi finds himself "married" to Lum: a beautiful, green-haired, horned Oni babe clad in a tiger-striped bikini. Lum is capable of flight,

has access to all sorts of outlandish alien technology, and generates high-voltage electricity whenever she's very happy or very angry: the latter of which is frequent because Ataru hits on every single woman he sees while mostly spurning Lum's advances. Yes, despite all promotional artwork, the main character of *Urusei Yatsura* isn't Lum; it's Ataru! Lum is primarily a catalyst for the mayhem and destruction. There are all sorts of other folklore-derived wackos too, and you can generally figure out everyone's deal within roughly one scene.

Only You's storyline is fairly grounded, as *Urusei Yatsura* plots go. A new race of rose-motif aliens arrives, announcing the marriage between Ataru and "Elle," the ruler of Planet Elle, who declares that when Ataru was a child, they became engaged as a result of a game of shadow tag. Despite having no memories of this and not knowing what Elle looks like—she does not appear until about 2/3 in



despite being on the cover—Ataru gladly agrees to abandon Lum, resulting in an interplanetary starfighter conflict and a race between Lum and Elle to quickly put together a massive Christian-style wedding in which everybody's invited, culminating with a reference to the only part of 1967's *The Graduate* I know about (thanks to *Wayne's World 2*).

As the theatrical directorial debut for now-legendary director Mamoru Oshii, he didn't have much opportunity to apply his personal style, as *Only You* was effectively made in 5 months concurrently with his work on directing the TV series. But don't worry; Mendou's private army still resembles the Axis forces of WW2 while anime-only character (and a favorite of mine) Megane remains ever the deranged otaku. The high point



© Rumiko Takahashi / Shogakukan

is Ataru, cackling maniacally, conferring his scheme to Megane of establishing a planet-wide harem of women. In later years, the premise and protagonist of *Urusei Yatsura* would be altered to create what fans now refer to as the "harem" and "magical girlfriend" sub-genres. I regret that nobody else dared to make their male protagonists irredeemable horndog jerks.

Discotek's Blu-Ray releases are, as ever, gold standards of preservation. Their high-definition

edition of *Only You* is the uncut version, containing the scenes originally excised from the theatrical release (stuff like the opening animation flex for Mendou's letter delivery), with a full-film color-correction and AstroRes upscaling used for footage restoration, so those impressive sci-fi space dogfight sequences brought to you by such luminaries as Yuji Moriyama and Masahito Yamashita never looked better. Even the old English dub has undergone a restoration to sound about as good as a dub of that era might. *Urusei Yatsura* is one of the most influential and revolutionary series of the decade, in all aspects, and it's all disappeared once before in the late 2000s so if you can manage it, consider picking up the Blu-Rays.

—Daryl Surat



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My Dress-Up Darling

A bombshell beauty decides



STUDIO/COMPANY
Crunchyroll

RATING
TV-MA

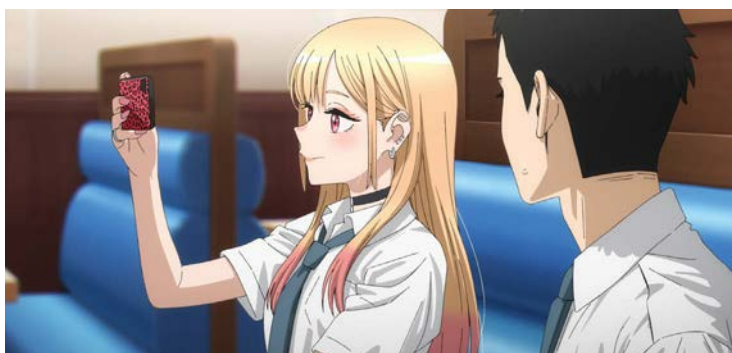
As someone who has never cosplayed in my entire life, I wasn't really sure how to initially look at a romantic comedy between a cosplaying girl and her outfit-crafting boyfriend. I know very few people who cos-

play and have seen only a few anime that feature cosplay in them; and even then, the cosplay feature in said anime are just there to highlight the otaku lifestyle in general, so cosplay specifically is very rarely the focal point of an entire show. Fortunately, *My Dress-Up Darling*—the anime adaptation of which aired during the winter 2022 anime season—comes in like a bat out of hell to prove me wrong.

From the very beginning, *My Dress-Up Darling* could easily be boiled down to another entry in the very-forward-girl-and-shy-boy-

dynamic collection of romance anime. For one thing, Wakana Gojo, who lives with his grandfather, an esteemed *kashirashi* (the term for a master craftsman of hina dolls), seeks to follow in his grandfather's footsteps. But after a childhood friend basically shamed him for being a boy playing with girl dolls, he pours himself into his craft more than his social life. Marin Kitagawa, on the other hand, looks to have all the trappings of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl—she's pretty, outgoing, and opens up Wakana's sheltered personality—but in execution she feels like an actual person who's passionate about, and has zero shame regarding, her interests.

While gender politics don't play much of a factor beyond the first episode, there's a lot of work the show does regarding deprogramming the assumption that hina dolls are a "girly" thing. There's a lot of thought and effort that goes into dollcrafting that *Dress-Up Darling* has no problem showing off. It's not just the setup of the show, it's Wakana's whole breath



and life and a huge part of the show. More importantly, what makes what could already be a boring, cut-and-paste pairing is the fact that these both just simply good kids, with neither character hiding some kind of ulterior motive. And it's not just that a bombshell beauty decides to be a recluse's friend, she needs someone who can help her sew her costume and isn't a jerk about it. And unlike Wakana, she has no shame about her hobbies. Her first scenes is her explaining a character web, for crying out loud.

Bottom line, the two quickly settle into a comfortable dynamic, propped up by strong and character writing and animation, the latter being provided by CloverWorks, who clearly understood the assignment and then some. The character designs are gorgeous on their own, but much of the subtle character animation helps elevate them in a way that makes feel very alive, such as a lot of the detail that goes into Wakana's passion for dollcrafting and, eventually, translating that into making costumes. Kitagawa in particular has such a wide range of body movements that you can tell where her intensity comes from.

Which brings me to the make-it-or-break-it element of the show—



the fanservice. Every time Marin's breasts jiggle, every time there's a detailed shot of someone's underwear, you can tell they're really testing the radars. Some parts you'd expect from a show about people who take their clothes in

order to be measured for costumes, but other parts ... well ... I dare to use the word "exhibitionist," almost to the point of parody. The fact that Marin's dream cosplay comes from BDSM eroge, while bold, doesn't exactly help

matters. In the second episode alone, which a lot of people cite as a prime example of this calamity, Marin nonchalantly strips down to a floral swimsuit while Gojo almost faints from the shock. Despite Wakana trying to reassure himself that it's only a business interaction, you can definitely see his discomfort in some scenes, especially when he's up close to Marin's bust point. Then again, a lot of this horniness seems to be character-based, rather than the typical objective camera being shoved into our eyes. Befitting a show that's about measuring bodies for costumes, Marina is very rarely animated in a sexualizing way; there's enough knowledge of bodies to articulate that this is all from the character's point of view rather than the audience's point of view, but it's still a very fine line.

My Dress-Up Darling has a lot of things that you'll find in other romantic comedies, and while it's very easy to build this one to just another show about an overly passive boy and a forward girl, there are a lot of things that help to elevate it beyond its core premise. If you can just make it past all the panty shots and jiggle fests, you'll be in for a treat!

—Michael Goldstein



World's End Harem

Weird, yet engrossing



STUDIO/COMPANY
Funimation

RATING
Not Rated

It's the year 2040, and a young man named Reito Mizuhara has been put into cryostasis, awaiting a cure for multiple sclerosis. Five years later, an even deadlier virus has emerged, and it's killed off about 99.9% of the world's population of men: the MK (Man Killer) virus. The remainder of human males in the world number

around a million who were cryogenically frozen before a cure could be found, and four others who are immune to the MK Virus. In *World's End Harem*, Reito and these four other men are required to mate with the entire planet full of women who remain in a bid to repopulate humanity.

The MK virus necessitated this breeding program, and it means there's a lot of sex that's

required to bring the world back to a place, eventually, where it might resemble the way things were before. Reito isn't immediately interested in lending his body to the cause, especially as there's still a woman he wants to be



©LINK, Kotaro Shono / Shueisha, World's End Harem Production Committee

A Whisker Away

Does everybody want to be a cat?



STUDIO/COMPANY
Netflix

RATING
TV-MA

Is it true that everybody wants to be a cat like Disney has taught us? Miyo "Muge" Sasaki certainly thinks so. After all, how else is she going to get away from her complicated home life, escape her lonely school-days, and finally get the attention of Kento Hinode?

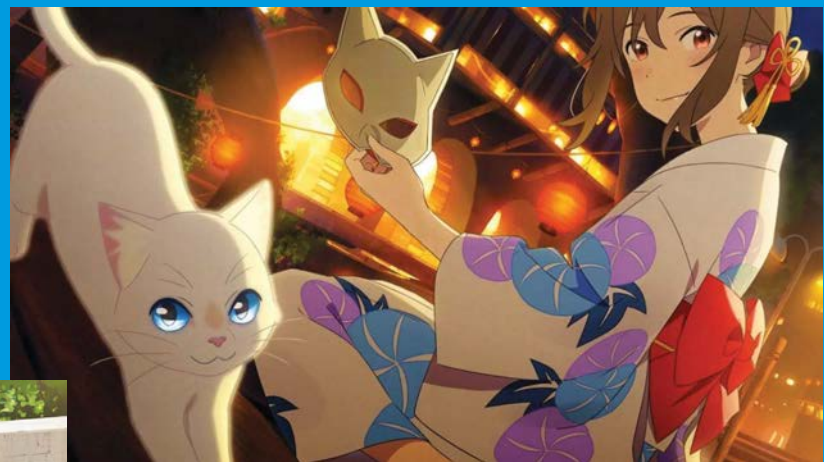
Thanks to a magic mask offered to her by the enigmatic mask seller, she effectively assumes the role of the stray cat named Taro, and it seems like a dream come true for her. But like all good spells, using the mask comes with a price, and Miyo will soon have to learn if even the most magical spell can untangle the tricky knots of the human heart.

A Whisker Away—the latest title from Mari Okada that's been on Netflix since its release in 2020—is the only film I can think that takes that age-old question, "Wouldn't life be easier if you

were a cat?," and put a YA/Disney Channel romantic spin on it: "Wouldn't it be easier to get the attention of the guy you're pining for by being a cat and quickly



become a part of his most intricate routines?" As you can imagine, this particular take is where the film's charms come in hot. To Miyo, there is only Kento, and everyone else is just a faceless extra, as evidenced by her depiction of everyone else



© MUGE Production Committee

with naturally above all others: his childhood friend Elisa Tachibana. As it just so happens, she's disappeared. And with that little tidbit in mind, Reito makes it his mission to both investigate this strange virus, all the while trying to avoid intercourse with, well, all of the women left in the world.

It's easy to assume that Reito would be a sex-crazed maniac, running around and coupling with every woman who approaches him. But despite the fate of humanity hanging in the balance, he isn't gung-ho about the prospect at all, and that's what makes *World's End Harem* such an interesting watch. It's a weird proposition for any normal man to wake up (years later at that) and want to immediately get it on with strange women, let alone during a near-extinction level event. It's understandable that he wouldn't want to get his rocks off immediately, and the fact that he doesn't immediately succumb to the pressure is pretty impressive.

But that doesn't mean he's going to be let off the hook. Most of *World's End Harem* is spent watching Reito and other men grapple with their newfound responsibilities, while watching the women left on the earth (who have their own needs, of course)



fawn over them. In the end, it can feel a bit like watching ecchi that's meant to be hentai, but there's an air of gloom and foreboding about it

that prevents it from ever really becoming the kind of titillating you'd expect from this type of story, despite the overtly sexual situations.

World's End Harem is intriguing in that it's very much the type of anime you keep watching because you don't know how bad things are going to continue to get. It's a fascinating watch, even if it doesn't fit within your typically umbrella of content that you'd watch. It does fall short in the animation department, as it absolutely could use some work there, but in sheer terms of keeping you watching and on the edge of your seat, it can do that all day and then some – especially when it comes to a miniature revenge story enacted by one of its characters. You might be expecting it, but the payoff is still sublime.

If you're ready to try something a little new (that still features harems, but only technically), *World's End Harem* is a weird yet engrossing time. It absolutely won't be for everyone, but for those who do take the plunge, it's worth strapping in and seeing where it leads. And where it leads is undoubtedly an interesting destination that you haven't seen before in your typical anime series.

—Brittany Vincent

as scarecrows multiple times throughout the film. And then there is home life, which we get a pretty apt description of in just the first few minutes alone, with the opening line being as follows: "Could you tell your father you want to live with me?" That's a lot of information to take in right from the beginning, having Miyo being forced to choose a stepmom she barely knows and a mother who just went through a pretty nasty divorce. Then again, it's something we've come to expect from Okada's style of writing.

So, when you take all of this into account, it's pretty easy to see why she would take the mysterious Mask Seller's offer to disguise herself as a cat, no questions asked, and insert herself into Kento's life. Meanwhile, Kento has basically shut himself from the rest of the world and his family, specifically his mother, who displays a massive disdain toward his son's passion for pottery. Not that Miyo actually cares; she's just finally happy to have Kento's attention. This web of dynamics alone is a breath of fresh air. In any other movie, her tendency to stay lost in her own fantasies—and the fact that she can be genuinely annoying at times—would be secondary while Kento's struggles would be the point, but here things are reversed, making for some good characterization, since other anime films would have her be weird in a way that's marketable and attractive.

There is a lot to dig into with this movie regarding insecurities, self-worth, and identity, and that alone would make for a fulfilling experi-



ence. The problem is, *A Whisker Away* doesn't seem content with just the cat transformation gimmick. It has to include the stepmother's

efforts to bond with Miyo and Yori's friendship with Miyo is played up to gesture toward some sort of arc that never comes to fruition. Many of these threads are half-baked at best, as, true to Miyo's obsession with Kento, the film can't seem to be mindful of all of the other people in her life that care about her. Of course, everything goes out the window in favor of manic third act and ultimate wrap-up.

Thankfully, what the movie lacks in coherence, it makes up for in production values and visuals. Studio Colorido has the cat out of the bag (no pun intended) when it comes to lush backgrounds and lively character animations, and that's not even considering the mystical world of cat spirits. Does it need a little more spark? Unfortunately, it does, but I'll take Ghibli-lite over nothing any day of the week.

Ultimately, *What A Whisker Away* lacks in flow and the ability to fully sell its romance, it makes up for in color and lighting and capturing the fullness of young love and human life. It's not doing anything revolutionary, but all this film wants to do is put a smile on your face. If you're a fan of silly romances, or if you just like anything involving cats, this might be the film for you.

—Michael Goldstein

Akebi's Sailor Uniform

Set up for greatness



STUDIO/COMPANY
Crunchyroll

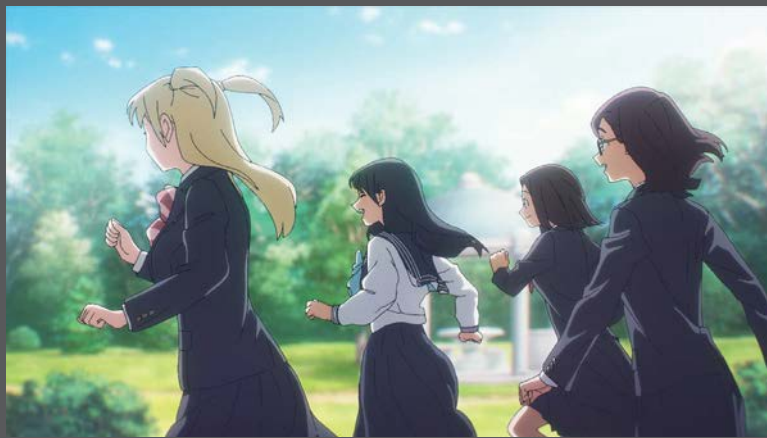
RATING
TV-14

In *Akebi's Sailor Uniform*, all eyes are on the traditional sailor uniform that so many girls wear to schools across Japan. Komichi Akebi is bursting with joy over the fact that she's been accepted into the same private school as her mother was so many years ago. It's been her dream, as long as she can remember, to emulate her idol Miki Fukumoto's sailor uniform, while attending Roubai Girls' Academy. Her mother sets about making a gorgeous school uniform for her to wear while attending the all-girls academy, just like the one she wore when she was a young girl. There's just one problem: when the first day of school arrives, everyone is wearing blazers instead of a traditional sailor uniform. Komichi is heartbroken.

But all isn't lost. After a quick chat with the principal, Komichi is given special permission to wear the uniform her mother made if she



©Hiro/SHUEISHA, PROJECT AKEBI



chooses to, making her the only student in the entire school who still wears the classic garment. With that, her school life begins, and she happily attends Roubai Academy looking to make tons of new friends. As a young girl from a more rural area, she's not as well-versed in the things other students do and say, so this school year is an important one for her as she not only stands out from the rest of the student body, but she also makes it her mission to be the "cool" girl she told her little sister she'd be, too.

The result aims to be a calming slice of life anime that looks absolutely gorgeous. And sure, it is, in many ways. But it's also a somewhat odd fetishistic vehicle that often veers into weirdly risqué territory. That might not bother some viewers, and there's nothing wrong with that type of content of course. It's just not the

childlike vision of innocence it almost proclaims to be on the tin, and because of this, some viewers may go into the show expecting something far different.

There isn't a lot going on in Komichi's world. In fact, the entire series is predicated on a lapse in communication that could have been resolved with a simple phone call or office visit before Komichi's mother spent the better part of a summer making a uniform by hand. There isn't much reason to get invested when this entire problem is of the protagonist's making, especially any othering she may feel for not wearing the "typical" uniform. It just seemed like a strange hill to die on, and not particularly one that would stand the test of the entire first season.

Even with all the strangeness, it's difficult not to be taken aback by CloverWorks' impec-

cable artwork. A series of gorgeous, detailed environments accompany beautifully drawn characters, Komichi and the rest of her family included. The amount of detail that goes into every blade of grass, every bit of moisture, every gesture, was crafted with love. It's a vision to behold, but the show can't stand on great-looking visuals alone.

Akebi's Sailor Uniform was set up for greatness initially, but it becomes tangled in its own ambition to be a lot of things to different people at once. It's unsure if it wants to be a light-weight ecchi series, an adorable slice of life show, or a bizarre iniquity that people will simply marvel over for visuals alone. It's hard to recommend to general audiences, but if you're looking for something that can't quite be categorized, it might be worth a watch.

—Brittany Vincent

5 Seconds Before New Manga Drops

New Manga Reviews



PUBLISHER
Viz Media

STORY AND ART
Kazuo Umezz

RATING
Teen Plus

Orochi

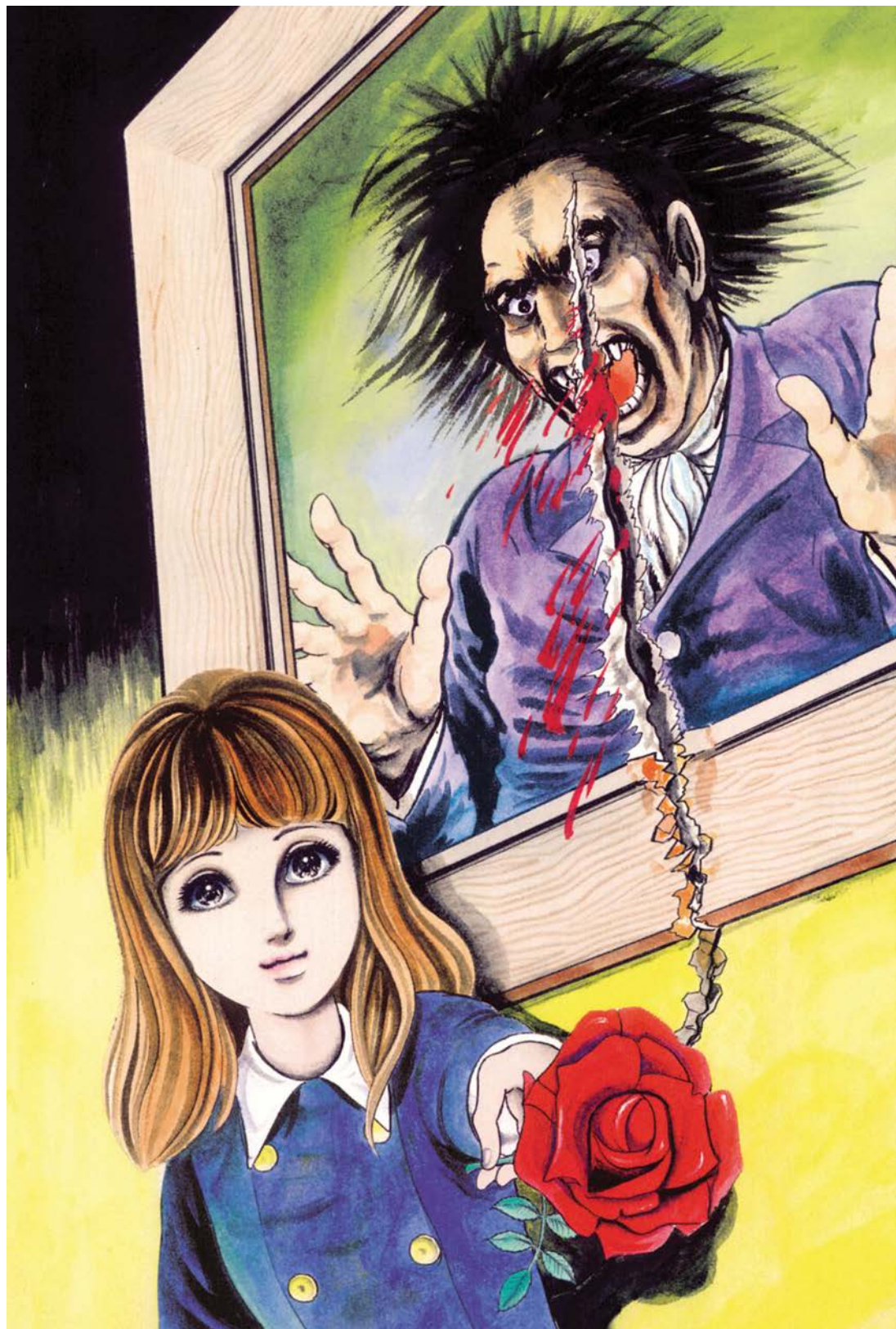
"This is the story of a woman consumed by obsession. Is there any other type of tale as terrifying?" "You there! Why do you hate bones? Bones are beautiful!" There's a vibe to Kazuo Umezz's horror manga that no other artist can capture, though many have tried: a mix of childlike simplicity and adult canniness, grim terror and Halloween glee, eclectic flights of fancy and funda-

mental human fears. The title character of *Orochi*, a teenage girl with unexplained supernatural powers, serves as the Cryptkeeper-like host to short stories that hurtle relentlessly through whatever monsters, moods, and mayhem Umezz wants to explore at the moment. Orochi sometimes gets it into her head to help the unfortunate protagonists, but she doesn't quite understand human emotions or morality, so her interventions just drive the horror to new depths.

Volume One includes two stories. "Sisters" begins with Orochi wandering into a random house and brainwashing everyone to perceive her as the maid, which allows her to observe the ongoing psychodrama between two beautiful sisters who are cursed to grow hideous warts all over their bodies when they turn eighteen. In "Bones," a woman's husband is killed, and Orochi, now posing as a nurse at a hospital, offers



OROCHI: UMEZZ PERFECTION! © 2006 Kazuo UMEZZ/SHOGAKUKAN



FROM THIS FLAME: COPYRIGHT OUMI KONOMI (FROM THIS FLAME PUBLISHED BY GLACIER BAY BOOKS)

to bring him back ... but, as anyone familiar with "The Monkey's Paw" can guess, the deal comes with ugly complications. Both stories turn the hysteria to eleven, with Gothic melodrama and gross-out gore fighting for page space ("My tongue ... it's rotted away!") and close-ups of characters' faces eternally contorting into screams, tears, and/or insane laughter. It's impossible to predict what will come next in an Umezz story: a zombie fighting a dog might be interrupted by a moody murder mystery which is then followed by a baby getting eaten by roaches. All the reader can do is hang on for dear life.

Viz previously published one volume of *Orochi*, covering one of the longer and less exciting stories in the series. The new edition does it right, releasing the series in attractive hardcover volumes based on a Japanese "perfect collection" edition. Any fan of horror manga owes it to themselves to read some Umezz, if only to see the enormity of his influence on modern creators; Orochi, for example, looks like every teenage girl Junji Ito would ever draw. The short stories in *Orochi* are a great introduction for readers new to Umezz, and dedicated fans won't want to miss the series either. **Recommended.** (Shaenon K. Garrity)

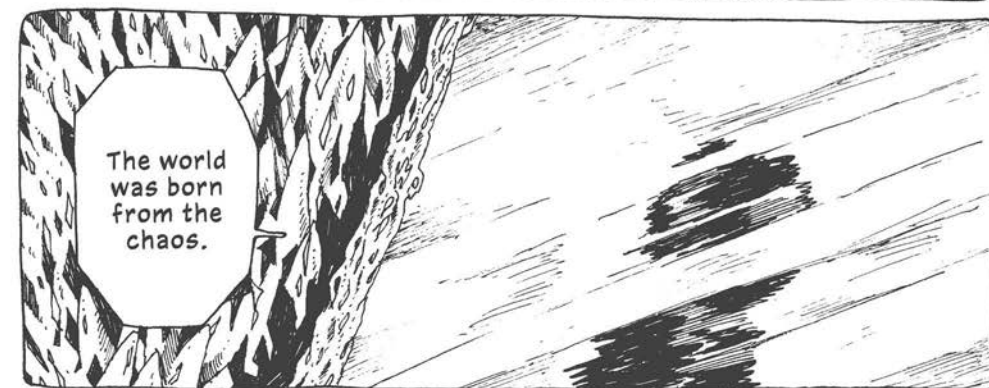
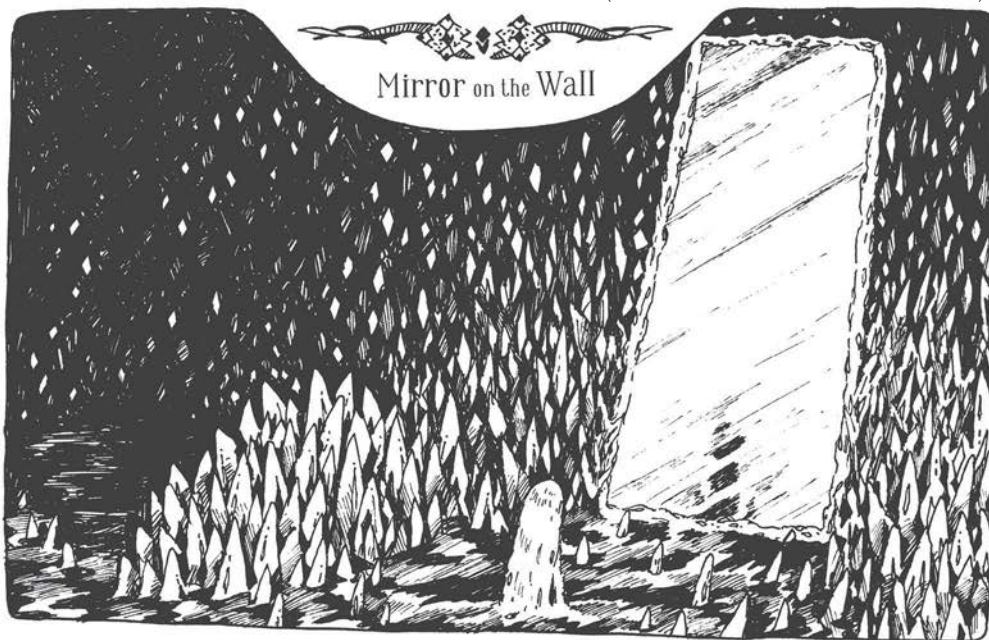


From This Flame

Glacier Bay continues its output of unique, artistically daring manga with this collection of haunting, delicate modern fairy tales, each no more than ten pages long. A flower goddess suffocates the world in flowers; a girl asks questions of a mirror that can only echo her own thoughts; butterflies cover a girl in a scene that turns from beautiful to nightmarish. In one of the longer

stories, a neighborhood's morning exercise session in the park is interrupted by a suicide, but helpful woodland spirits fill in; in another, a boy sets out on a quest to find the source of the river of blood that feeds his village.

Some of the stories follow dreamlike plots, while others are almost entirely abstract. One simply evokes the feeling of walking around without glasses: "It could be said that nearsightedness is an evolution of mankind," Konomi muses. All the stories are lovely to look at. Konomi draws abstracted, curious-eyed characters and evocative settings in loose, lively lines. Imaginative open page layouts fill with patterns of light, flowers, crystal, and water. In an afterword, Konomi explains the inspiration behind each piece, but they're best enjoyed without any expectation of understanding. *From This Flame* is another entrancing collection of genre-defying manga from a publisher that's quickly becoming a must-follow. **Recommended.** (Shaenon K. Garrity)



The Song of Yoru and Asa

Yoru, a hot, brooding indie rocker, joins a band fronted by the cocky but less talented Asaichi, a horndog who crows, "Why'd I want to be in a band? To get chicks!" Yoru has the voice, Asa has the attitude, and together they're set to lead the band to stardom. But during a post-concert orgy with some groupies, Asa accidentally has sex with Yoru, a mistake their bandmates find both improbable and amusing. Yoru, a man of few words, speaks up just enough to indicate he's open to further hookups, while Asa loudly protests that he's straight—but, this being a BL manga, he can't



PUBLISHER
Denpa

STORY AND ART
Harada

RATING
Mature

stop thinking about Yoru.

Meanwhile, Shiori, one of the groupies (remember them?) has a handsome brother, lori, who isn't exactly the legitimate businessman she says he is. When she drags lori to a concert, Yoru's magnetic stage presence awakens something inside him, as indicated by a "sproing" sound effect emanating from his pants. For her part, Shiori would



prefer to sleep with Yoru, is willing to settle for Asa, but is just as happy rooting for sexy guy-on-guy makeouts.

The Song of Yoru and Asa is standard BL material elevated by great art, an engaging rock-industry setting, a cheeky sense of humor, and a delightfully filthy translation. The dialogue is peppered with dirty jokes and f-bombs: "It was your own damn fault for growing out this girly f***ing hair! Get a f***ing haircut!" Busy, dialogue-heavy pages give way to spectacular, sweat-drenched concert scenes and even sweatier sex scenes in which nothing is censored. Artist Harada seems to delight in seeing how explicit she can get, drawing enormous full-frontal (or full-backside, as the position warrants) shots of moments that other BL artists might discreetly cover. She has fun with the absurd elements of the story ("Dude, nobody makes that kind of mistake!") while taking the characters and the eroticism seriously. This is top-drawer BL for fans with a weakness for bad boys and rock-star swagger. Recommended. (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas

STORY AND ART
Zeniko Sumiya

RATING
Teen (13+)

5 Seconds Before a Witch Falls in Love

Early in *5 Seconds Before a Witch Falls in Love* there's a battle between the two main characters, the witch-hunter Lilith and the witch ... Meg. That's right: the witch-hunter is named for the Talmudic mother of daemons and the witch's name is Meg. This is gonna be long one.

The first battle ends quickly with Lilith being turned into cat. If I were reading this for non-review purposes I might have wondered why a witch-hunter would attack witch whom she's not only fought before, but seems to be an arch-foe of, with no defense against magic. But as a critic, genre is my primary concern. This is primarily a yuri manga, so a well-thought-out magic system is less the point than romantic comedy.

5 Seconds Before a Witch is so much better as a romantic comedy than as a fantasy manga that I



could picture it as a live-action sitcom. The witch looks like any middling cartoonist's "cute witch" character, the demon is just a sexy woman with bat wings, and the angel is a generic blonde woman despite being named Samuel. Objectively, those are boring designs for supernatural creatures in a visual medium. Subjectively? Any story with a female angel named Samuel loses this Milton scholar's good will.

The angel and demon don't need to be there anyway, as they take away the one thing the manga gets right: the banter between Meg and Lilith. The two get some funny lines, especially while Lilith is a cat. Never fight the manga truism that talking cats always work. Disappointingly, Lilith soon changes back, the manga is left flailing for direction, and the characters suddenly start attending a modern-day Japanese high school that somehow exists in their D&D-style medieval village.

Would I recommend *5 Seconds Before a Witch Falls in Love*? No. I'd usually soften that by admitting I'm not a big yuri fan and other readers may get more out of it, but I'm not sure

that would be true in this case. There just isn't enough going on for most people to keep reading. The reason I picked this manga sight unseen is that *5 Seconds Before a Witch Falls in Love* is a truly great title. Why five seconds? Are they different for non-witches? I can think of at least three plots for that title that would be more interesting than a lesbian retelling of "The Frog Prince" with extra wacky neighbors. There's a reason most retellings of "The Frog Prince" end with the kiss: because the transformation is the point! In a story that wasn't worried about page count, they could skip straight from Lilith reverting to human to the bonus chapter at the end without losing much. (Robert McCarthy)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Shino Shimizu

RATING
13+

I'm a Wolf but My Boss Is a Sheep

In a world populated by humanoids descended from animals, most people are split into either herbivore or carnivore ancestry. Each group has vestiges of their ancient forbearers still hard-wired into their instincts. Oogami the wolf, formerly in the sales department of Mikado Bedding, has transferred to the planning department,

which develops new products. The entire planning department is staffed by sheep, and Oogami finds himself crushing hard on his boss Mitsuiji-san.

Office romance gets an amusing glow-up and a charming twist, thanks to Shimizu's confident hand with both art and story. Oogami's predatory instincts put him in a series of awkward situations. Seemingly torn between love, lust, and gluttony, his primal urges are constantly confounded by Mitsuiji's steady bravery. As a sheep among predators, Mitsuiji sometimes falters at her job, trying to fend off her own flight reflexes in meetings full of carnivores, but she rises to each challenge and is the hero of her sheepish department.

Full of humor and heart, *My Boss Is a Sheep* is a delightful spin on the workplace romcom, and the world is well thought out. The art compliments the plot; each character is unique, and their expressive faces and body language betray their animal natures. The characters all have different body types as well. Mitsuiji is buxom and thick, contrasting with Oogami's lanky lupine build and differentiating her from the other sheep in her department. The realistic office backgrounds are a little cookie-cutter, but they get the job done, and the screentones add adequate contrast. As effective as the art is, the real heart of the book is the characters and their interactions, which have genuine charm. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Eri Ejima

RATING
13+

Young Ladies Don't Play Fighting Games

In manga, every school has one knock-out gorgeous, cool-headed girl who makes everyone go absolutely bonkers when she passes by or gazes at them. In this manga, new transfer student Shirayuri is that girl. Her classmates call her "Shirayuri-sama" and fawn over her every move. On the other end of the popularity curve, Aya, a transfer student on a scholarship, is trying her best to fit in.

As in other comedy slice-of-life manga, like *Komi Can't Communicate*, the pretty girl has a secret. When Aya and Shirayuri meet by chance, Aya discovers Shirayuri's secret: she's obsessed with fighting games. Unfortunately for her, Kuromi Girls Academy forbids its students to own or play games on campus, including in the dorms. So when Aya catches Shirayuri busting out hit combos and K.O.s, Shirayuri is terrified of being found out. She begs Aya to not tell the teachers, but Aya has her own secret: she loves fighting games, too. Although she gave up on gaming to learn how to be a prim and proper young lady, Aya still has a burning love of fighting games.

If you think this is a bland "cute girls do cute



things” manga, you’re sorely mistaken. *Young Ladies Don’t Play Fighting Games* takes a sharp turn from its cutesy opening to an action-packed fighting manga. Aya is quick to deny her love of games, but seeing Shirayuri play so effortlessly ignites her passion once again. Naturally, when Shirayuri asks her to fight, she obliges. The intensity of the girls’ focus on winning is comical and often chaotic. They risk a lot to sneak off to play,

the first volume. It often feels like two different manga, getting fixated on the game action and then pulling back just enough to break up the battles with character moments. It’s hilarious when the girls get so into a game that their noses bleed or they jump out a window to avoid being caught, and the comic timing is consistently great. So far, the story is about Aya and Shirayuri’s newfound rivalry, but hopefully future

volumes will introduce some more gamers to keep the dynamic from growing stale, or at least to broaden their game library.

As of the first two volumes, *Young Ladies Don’t Play Fighting Games* has yet to develop into a truly engrossing series, but it’s still very promising. If you’re looking for a fast-paced new read and are partial to video games, you’ll likely enjoy this series. (Brianna Fox-Priest)

Daily Report About My Witch Senpai

Full of sparkly stars, magic, and romance, *Daily Report About My Witch Senpai* weaves a warm spell around the reader’s heart. Misono, an average young salaryman, has a unique co-worker, Shizuka, a witch working in the big city. Despite her magic, Shizuka lives an average life, working at an office and flying home on her broom at the end of the day.

While office romance is front and center, this is also a touching tale of breaking away from bad relationships. Misono notices how hard Shizuka works and what a people pleaser she is. Her co-workers take advantage of her, asking her to run errands on her broom and stay late at work. Misono, concerned for Shizuka’s well-being, advises her to take care of herself. As work increasingly throws them together, Misono’s concern turns into a crush. Shizuka’s feelings also shift, though she chalks Misono’s kindness up to just trying to be nice. When Shizuka’s crummy ex-boyfriend Kou Hiwatari comes back to Tokyo, they both have

decisions to make.

While the office backdrop is a little bland—there’s no indication of what exactly the company *does*—it doesn’t diminish the plot. It’s rewarding to see Shizuka’s growth as a person and Misono’s thoughtfulness in comparison with the callous Kou. Toward the end of Volume 1, Misono and Shizuka, finally realize the depths of their feelings for each other, but this may only be the beginning of bigger trials ahead. The art is winning, with a motif of star patterns that adds to the sense that the world is full of magic. The characters look younger than the twenty-somethings they’re supposed to be, to the point that at first glance the book could be mistaken for a high school romance, but they’re expressive and adorable to look at. The softly rounded linework adds sweetness to the characters and mirrors the gentleness of the plot. (Che Gilson)



Welcome Back, Alice

Like an overstuffed suitcase, *Welcome Back Alice* has a lot to unpack, more than can be done in a single review. But let’s begin with the plot: Yohei, Kei, and Yui have been friends forever. Yohei, an awkward and naive young man, nurses a crush on Yui. The more worldly Kei tells Yo how to masturbate, allowing Yo to privately indulge his fantasies about Yui. Everything comes crashing down

when Yo discovers Yui confessing her feelings to Kei. The love triangle seems to be torn apart forever when Kei suddenly moves to Hokkaido.

Fast forward three years to high school, when Yo decides to finally make his move toward Yui. But on their first day of class, Kei makes a stunning return as a beautiful girl, announcing that he’s “done being a boy” and has received special permission to wear a girl’s uniform to school. (He continues to use male pronouns.) Yo and Yui’s emotional lives are abruptly upended. Yohei finds himself torn between the girl he’s had a crush on for years and unexpected stirrings toward Kei. Meanwhile, Kei sexually torments both Yohei and Yui, preying on their hormones and confusion.

Many readers may be taken aback by what can be read as homophobia and transphobia, but this isn’t a trans story. Any attempts to nail down the central characters’ gender or sexuality are constantly thwarted. It actually helps to start by reading Oshimi’s afterword, wherein he talks about his own struggles with masculinity as dictated by society. The manga allows him to work through a slew of insecurities through the lens of horny teenagers. Oshimi’s naked honesty about himself and his characters creates a compelling drama out of material that, in other hands, could turn into either porn or ill-con-



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Makena Mochida

RATING
13+

as even having a game cartridge on campus is grounds for expulsion, but that doesn’t stop them from playing round after round of 1vs.1 fights.

Each volume is a quick read, with the fight scenes filled with sketched-in attacks and sound effects and the non-game action focused on the girls’ efforts to find safe places to play. The artwork shifts between beautifully drawn shojo characters to intense, bloody battles throughout



ceived comedy. The book is skillful but demanding, full of emotion and big questions about gender, orientation, and sex.

Welcome Back Alice will not appeal to everyone, and some readers may find it repellant for plenty of reasons. But those who have enjoyed Oshimi's other boundary-pushing work, and readers looking for an honest dissection of teenage sexuality in all its messiness, will find a lot of depth. Oshimi's art, with its strong sense of composition and confident ins, walks hand in hand with the story. The characters look consistent throughout the book and the panels flow easily for a seamless, immersive reading experience. *Welcome Back Alice* isn't necessarily comfortable, but it is compelling and raw. (Che Gilson)

Hello Melancholic!

Hello Melancholic! is a sweet slow-burn romance about music, passion, and friendship. Tall and clumsy, Asano Minato is a first-year high school girl with no friends and no prospects for making any. Scarred by her experiences in junior high, she fades into the background, even when playing her trombone in a local competitive orchestra. Minato is shocked when an outgoing upper-classman tracks her down and invites her to join a band. Lively and optimistic, Hibiki is everything Minato isn't: pretty, confident, and devoted to

making music for the pure joy and creativity of it. Hibiki is determined to lure Minato into her band and outmaneuvers all of Minato's protests. Suddenly Minato finds herself with a circle of friends and a possible love interest in Hibiki. Of course, her shy reserve keeps her from seeing what's right in front of her.

Hello Melancholic! is Ohsawa's first foray into high-school romance. In the afterword, they note that they primarily draw yuri manga featuring office ladies in love. Happily, this book perfectly captures the awkward teen years, and it's fun to follow characters who are passionate about an art form. Even the choice of instruments for each girl in the band becomes an opportunity to suggest their individual quirks: there are drums, trombone, a flute, and two guitarists. Ohsawa's art is skillful, with a sketchy, organic quality which adds some rock n' roll grunge to every page. Though the characters all have similar face shapes, their features, hair, and height are varied enough to differentiate everyone. Their expressions are hilarious and capture the high emotions of the teenage years. As the protagonist, high-strung Minato gets the most page time, and she's sympathetic enough to deserve it. Readers will cheer for Minato and Hibiki to get together. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER

Kodansha

STORY AND ART

Akiho Ieda

RATING

13+

Penguin and House

Everyone should be lucky enough to have a tiny, adorable penguin butler! But only Hayakawa is so blessed. His tiny pet penguin Pen (a.k.a. Pen-chan, a.k.a. Pen-taro, a.k.a. Penguin) navigates daily life with luck and exuberance. Eager to please his owner, the super-talented Pen braves the grocery store, waits on Hayakawa's friends, knits sweaters, and cooks three meals a day. While the relationship is a bit one-sided, Hayakawa does try his best for his extraordinary penguin.

Full of small adventures and domestic chores, *Penguin and House* is a sweet treat, possibly as

PENGUIN & HOUSE: ©AKIHO IEDA/KODANSHA, LTD



PUBLISHER

Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART

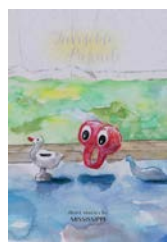
Yayoi Ohsawa

RATING

13+

good as one of Penguin's custom cakes. The art is extremely simple and the humans, especially Penguin's owner, are barely doodles. But the simple style works with the straightforward short chapters and gentle humor. Penguin himself is a basic oval with a face drawn on it. His blank, staring eyes absorb the world and convey far more than any dialogue could. The backgrounds are typical photo-referenced buildings and backdrops that could easily be copied and pasted from a clipart book.

Although the art is only serviceable, *Penguin and House* is an entertaining slice-of-life manga with enjoyable characters. The funniest moments come from Hayakawa's two best friends and their reactions to Pen-chan. Seto thinks Penguin is the cutest thing ever and even secretly follows him on shopping trips, while the rough-and-tumble Ota treats Penguin as a friendly rival and is continually impressed with his phenomenal skills. There's no overarching plot, just a series of discrete one-to-two-chapter stories detailing Pen's attempts to make his owner's life better. While Hayakawa makes clumsy attempts at expressing his appreciation, it never seems like enough. This tiny but mighty bird is sure to win over readers. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER
Glacier Bay Books

STORY AND ART
Mississippi

RATING
Unrated/Teen

Invisible Parade

Cerebral, understated and defying all genre, *Invisible Parade* includes thirteen short stories, brief vignettes where real life intersects with the surreal. Each story is tender and deeply human, portraying average individuals on the cusp of something odd. This is a world where the smallest events become epic, and the epic becomes surprisingly sweet. At first

glance, the art style looks amateurish, but that belies the skill it takes to achieve such clarity and simplicity. Mississippi (a.k.a. Takashi Horiguchi) is an active illustrator, painter, and designer, and that skill comes through in the loose energetic line work. The loose, hand-drawn art adds a personal touch to the settings and a warmth to the stories. The empathy Mississippi has for every subject and character elevates the small tales from the mundane to the transcendently human.

Each story is surprising in its own way. One is about a man whose bicycle turns out to be an alien, and instead of scrapping the bike, he helps it get reconstructed into a new life as a friendly robot. In another, an aquarium cleaning mishap results in the loss of the tank's shrimp. Some of the short stories take place in a strange here-and-now where UFOs hover over a Kyoto suburb, while others take place in a far future where most real animals have been replaced by robots.



The Glacier Bay edition presents these stories in a beautiful edition with blue ink and a dust jacket. Each of the tales in *Invisible Parade* is a unique gem polished to a warm shimmer. Don't be dissuaded by the higher price point; this book is a keeper and worth returning to over and over again. Recommended. (Che Gilson)

Sakamoto Days

There's a staple convention of what might be called the "dad fiction" genre: that of being the best at something in one's youth before settling down to suburban life, only for circumstances to arise that show the hero has "still got it." As fiction—and only as fiction—this framing rules and I welcome it in shonen manga, not just seinen manga or Liam Neeson movies. Enter



PUBLISHER
Viz

STORY AND ART
Yuto Suzuki

RATING
Teen+

Sakamoto Days by Yuto Suzuki. Taro Sakamoto was once the best: in this case, a top assassin in the Japanese underworld. But he abandoned his life of crime to settle down and start a family, turning into the fat coach from *Slam Dunk* in the process. But what both regular townsfolk and the shadow leagues of assassins fail to realize is that pudgy, apron-clad, middle-aged (hold on, is he even 30 years old?!) dad running the register at the small-town convenience store ... is STILL the greatest legendary assassin!

INVISIBLE PARADE: COPYRIGHT MISSISSIPPI (INVISIBLE PARADE PUBLISHED BY GLACIER BAY BOOKS)

Therein lies the glory of *Sakamoto Days*. The premise seems grim, and the villains tend toward beheading and dismembering one another, but despite Suzuki's talent for drawing gritty action there's plenty of visual absurdity to an overweight clerk demonstrating superhero-level strength, speed, and resilience while using weaponry consisting largely of convenience-store items such as cough drops, frying pans, and the classic non-lethal technique of "just pick up a refrigerator and slam them with it." You see, Sakamoto has sworn to kill no more! More or less.

Volume 1, as expected, focuses on introducing the premise and supporting cast, particularly the clairvoyant hitman Shin who becomes Sakamoto's first employee. Future volumes will reveal more sinister (and silly!) criminals, but as long as Shin reads minds and Sakamoto mostly communicates in thought bubbles rather than speaking aloud, I encourage readers to hear Sakamoto's lines as though voiced by Garfield. (Daryl Surat)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment
STORY AND ART
Kakeru
RATING
Mature

Into the Deepest, Most Unknowable Dungeon

Into the Deepest, Most Unknowable Dungeon sells itself as an isekai story for people who don't like isekai. Author Kakeru has been in the ero-manga trade for a long time, with a blog running as far back as the late aughts, around the time when digital tablets and Pixiv were becoming ubiquitous among indie manga creators. *Dungeon* is

certainly in the wheelhouse of Seven Seas's more adventurous Ghost Ship imprint, fulfilling the promise of plenty of sex and violence, with bare breasts popping out and goblins being cleaved in two in the first chapter. The question is: does all of this add up to a good manga?

The setup is the same as countless other isekai: a down-on-his-luck salaryman is hit by a truck, dies, and is reborn in another world. He becomes Jean, a regular human without any special abilities, starting over as an infant and using memories of his previous life to gain a very slight advantage over those around him. After working hard to sculpt his body and hone his fighting skills, he's given the chance to enroll in a school for aspiring adventurers, where he throws himself wholeheartedly into preparing for a career filled with danger, romance, and untold rewards. An encounter with an ambitious young woman immediately complicates things and Jean realizes that he has a very limited understanding of how things work in this world, which leads to some awkwardly intimate situations.

To put it simply, Jean's urge for adventure is met head-on by his desire for some extra

INTO THE DEEPEST, MOST UNKNOWABLE DUNGEON: © KAKERU 2020



warmth in his bed at night, and *Dungeon* asks, "Why not both?" This could be the impetus for a fun, trashy affair, but the manga then goes on at length to world-build around the idea that women's role is to support strong men by relieving their stress and making themselves available for a tumble in the hay. *Dungeon* presents sex as a ladder for female adventurers to climb up in the world, and doubles down on the idea of women as sex toys just when you think it's time for the notion to be subverted a little. At least the female characters are presented as competent fighters, but their role in the party's dungeon crawl remains servile.

Looking past the pervasive sexism, the plot doesn't develop much beyond "these guys want to go into this cave." The best moments, which



are few and far between, come from a handful of unexpectedly witty turns of phrase, thanks to a localization that's much better than *Dungeon* deserves.

If *Dungeon* is meant to be satire, it's not particularly good satire. If it's meant to be erotic, it doesn't titillate all that much either. *Dungeon* won't teach you how to nock an arrow or handle a sword, and it spends so much time explaining how its world works that the volume ends before anyone gets more than a couple of steps into the first dungeon. Readers with good taste will leave this manga in the deepest, most unknowable section of their local bookstore, while readers who are there for the smut will be too frustrated with the low boob-to-text ratio to read much past the first sex scene. (David Estrella)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Yu Hashimoto

RATING
Older Teen

2.5 Dimensional Seduction

In the war between 2-D fantasy and 3-D human beings, everyone is a loser except for those who walk the fine line between the two. *2.5 Dimensional Seduction*, by Yu Hashimoto, a relative unknown in manga, is an unexpectedly good-spirited look at a hopeless otaku torn between his obsession with fictional characters and a real-life girl who may be even

more obsessed with his favorites than he is.

Abandoned by his mother at a young age and continuously bullied by girls, Okumura is primed to retreat into crushes on anime characters. As the sole remaining member of the Manga Club at his school, he's prepared to sequester himself in his sanctuary, a club room brimming with

sexy manga and voluptuous figures with cast-off clothing. Just when he's settled in with his favorite anime, in bursts Lilysa Amano, a bespectacled beauty who proudly declares that she loves manga and wishes to join the club. Before Okumura can shout "fake geek girl," Lilysa is stripping down to her underwear and gearing up in cosplay after misreading Okumura's steadfast devotion to fictional sexpots.

While I believe that *2.5 Dimensional Seduction* has its heart in the right place, be forewarned that this manga challenges how much nudity a title can get away with under an Older Teen label. Most chapters climax with girls getting their tops removed for one reason or another and accidentally falling over our hero, putting him in danger of receiving the soft, squishy gratification he desperately tries to deny himself. After all, what would his waifu, Liliel, think if he started developing feelings for a real person?

2.5D is filled to the brim with sex comedy

stereotypes, but it's also refreshing in its willingness to explore the pervy interests of otaku girls without getting too weird about it. Lilysa is drawn to the characters she cosplays for the combination of sexiness and power they represent, and she has a keen eye for details that help her translate a flat drawing into a costume that even the cynical Okumura can appreciate. The most interesting thing about *2.5D* is that it takes the mentality behind fandom seriously and reflects the common real-life story of cosplayers finding confidence through playing manga and anime characters ("Whoa, so women can talk about this stuff?"), all in the package of a silly ecchi manga that revels in tried-and-true tropes.

While nothing revolutionary, *2.5 Dimensional Seduction* is a well-

made manga that, underneath all the fanservice, is genuinely interested in the confusion of adolescence and the challenges of reconciling reality with fantasy. Most of the elements are pure delusional fantasy, but sometimes hyper-exaggerated manga scenarios can remind us of the rare sparks of magic in our mundane lives. Few of us will ever be forced to hang out with a hot cosplayer with a deep love of smutty manga, but it's still nice to imagine. (David Estrella)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Miyako Miyahara

RATING
15+

I Can't Believe I Slept with You

We've all made bad choices when it comes to romantic partners. Unfortunately, for 24-year-old Chiyo Koduka, hers is intertwined with the needs of her daily life. Broke and unemployed, she's behind on her rent and has no idea what to do. So when her landlord Hara Ritsuka comes to her with a simple proposition, she accepts. The deal in

question? A one-night stand. Chiyo immediately regrets her decision, but it's too late. She's entangled herself in what grows into a live-in relationship with her landlord! Oops.

This might sound like the setup for a drama, but *I Can't Believe I Slept with You* is a light yuri rom-com that'll have you regularly laughing as you turn the pages. Chiyo insists that she regrets having slept with Hara and makes a big deal out of what she's done. But to make up for all the rent back payments she's missed, she continues giving Hara "favors"—to the point that Hara even creates a payment schedule to help illustrate the deal Chiyo is getting.

Chiyo might be indignant about what she's doing to get by, but Hara seems less exploitative than simply lonely and looking for a relationship. She makes it a point to remind Chiyo that everything that happens is something she's consented to. She also appears to have struggled in the past with her sexual identity, something Chiyo is not initially kind about. But as the two continue to spend time together, it becomes clear that the two are surprisingly suited to each other.

I Can't Believe I Slept with You has a lot of fun exploring a relationship where the couple goes "all the way" right away. Before becoming friends, before getting to know each other, even before deciding whether they want to be a couple, they've entered into something of an awkward agreement. Their efforts to build a relationship after sleeping together makes for a truly original contemporary love story.

The art is attractive and cleanly inked, clearly illustrating the slight age difference between Chiyo and Hara and emphasizing their unique personalities. Chiyo, a nerdy gaming and anime fan, feels-down-to-earth and relatable. Hara is



2.5 DIMENSIONAL SEDUCTION: © 2019 BY YU HASHIMOTO

I CAN'T BELIEVE I SLEPT WITH YOU!
© MIYAHARA MIYAKO 2020



alternately calm, supportive, and intriguingly calculating. The art brings the characters to life in a way that doesn't always happen in yuri romances.

A fun read for anyone looking for an out-of-the-ordinary yuri series, *I Can't Believe I Slept with You* is unorthodox from the very beginning. That's exactly the reason to jump in and see where it takes you. **Recommended.** (Brittany Vincent)



PUBLISHER
Viz

STORY AND ART
Various Artists

RATING
Unrated/All Ages

Tribute to Star Wars

My favorite output from Viz Media's ongoing collaboration with Disney to date is this hardcover art book, a collection of glossy full-page illustrations of key moments and characters from the *Star Wars* saga, each by a different noteworthy Japanese artist. It's a fitting subject for such a collaboration: as the foreword deftly notes, *Star Wars* was inspired in part by Japanese culture and film, and over the years the series has inspired Japanese artists who in turn inspired later installments of the *Star Wars* mythos.



PUBLISHER
Udon

STORY AND ART
Yasuki Tanaka

RATING
Unrated/Teen

Summertime Rendering

Coming hot on the heels of announcements of an upcoming anime adaptation exclusive to the Disney+ streaming service, *Summertime Rendering* arrives with high expectations, receiving a high-profile release before most people will have had a chance to check out the anime. *Summertime* ran in the Shonen Jump+ digital service until serialization finished in early 2021. Udon Entertainment, a longtime presence in anime and video game art book publishing, is making an aggressive push to get English-language audiences caught up by dropping two batches of hardcover

The tribute illustrations are presented alphabetically by artist's name, with each entry accompanied by a short comment from the artist along with a profile bio and a list of their major works. Many of the featured artists have at least some work available in official English translation, though there are exceptions, such as Kazuo Mafune of *Super Doctor K* and its sequel *K2* fame. Most notably, *Mobile Suit Gundam* co-creator Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, whose illustration serves as the cover, admits that, yes, Char Aznable's helmet in *Gundam* is indeed just Darth Vader's helmet colored white and with horns stuck on it.

Nearly all of the tributes are based on either the original trilogy or the prequel trilogy; only a few artists chose to illustrate the recently concluded sequel trilogy and spinoffs, and none of the television/streaming entries are represented either. While this is no doubt a victory lap for the angry YouTubers out there who have helped turn *Star Wars* fandom into one of the most

toxic fandoms of all (that distinction used to be for *Star Trek*!), this is likely just a function of the fact that nearly every artist chose the *Star Wars* they first saw in their youth. For those yearning to see more recent *Star Wars* material represented, don't worry: an entire artbook dedicated to *Star Wars: Visions* is just around the corner! (Daryl Surat)



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omnibus releases over the summer. Manga publishers often catch flak for getting titles out after the anime airs, so this is an impressively quick turn-around on the publishing side of things.

A young man, Shinpei, returns to his hometown after a long absence to attend the funeral of a childhood friend who drowned while attempting to save a little girl. Almost as suddenly as he arrives, he begins to notice strange happenings that eventually culminate in blood-

ple who like to marathon a series from cover to cover without taking a break.

Unhealthy reading habits aside, I get the sense that we've been here before, and I'm not talking about the time loops in the story. The art style is attractive, the pacing is brisk, the concept sets up endless possibilities, but after finishing the first volume and taking a step back to take it in, it sure does feel like Yasuki Tanaka has simply reinvented the wheel. Specifically, *Sum-*

summertime Rendering has big-time *Higurashi When They Cry* vibes, and not necessarily in a good way. Too much feels cribbed from Ryukishi07's evergreen time-looping suspense-mystery franchise about a group of kids contending with a shadowy force that has a stranglehold on a quiet Japanese village. The list of surface parallels is extensive, and whether it's due to coincidence or inspiration, some of *Summertime's* sharp twists and turns are muted by the fact that a wildly popular series did the same things 20 years ago.

Summertime Rendering is formulated for success in a way that makes it all but certain that it will do well, especially with the manga and anime rolling out side by side. It has broad appeal, like a binge-worthy TV series mixed with the aesthetics of a Mamoru Hosoda film. Some of the teen drama is overwrought, like the simmering love quadrangle that drives

some of the characters' more questionable decisions, but the series still has plenty of time to correct these issues and lean into its strengths. If you can overlook all the striking similarities to a certain *other* series about teenagers failing to avert ritualistic murders enacted by an indescribable evil during a particularly hot Japanese summer, you're sure to enjoy *Summertime Rendering*. (David Estrella)



THE 100 GIRLFRIENDS WHO REALLY, REALLY, REALLY, REALLY LOVE YOU: © 2020 BY RIKITO NAKAMURA, YUKIKO NOZAWA



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment
STORY
Rikito Nakamura
ART
Art by Yukiko Nozawa
RATING
15+

The 100 Girlfriends Who Really, Really, Really, Really Love You

Aijo Rentaro has it bad. He's asked a hundred girls out and been turned down by every single one, with each rejection crueler than the last. Fed up with being completely lost in the love department, he prays for assistance from above. One god decides to respond, but not in the way Aijo anticipated. The god appears to share his decree:

Aijo will find not only the love of his life, but 100 of them! Lucky, right? Not exactly.

In *The 100 Girlfriends Who Really, Really, Really, Really Love You*, it turns out it's possible to have too much of a good thing. Destined (or cursed?) to have over 100 girlfriends by the end of high school, Aijo becomes a love magnet who attracts every girl he meets. All he needs to do is make eye contact with a girl, and a shock takes over their bodies. It's true love at first sight, and Aijo insists that he feels the same way. While it might be difficult for most people to juggle just one girlfriend, Aijo works on making every single one happy.

That's not just because he's a nice guy, though. The God of Love warns that if Aijo doesn't return one of his soulmates' feelings, they'll die. So Aijo has to work tirelessly to keep all the girls who fall for him happy, even if it means being at the center of the most expansive polyamorous relationship of all time.

Getting to know Aijo's girlfriends is pretty interesting. His first two girlfriends, Hakari and Karane, even have some feelings for each other. The female characters are developed a bit beyond the stock harem manga types like "the tsundere one" or "the bookish one" and have some quirks to identify with. Further, the shenanigans this growing harem gets into can be hilariously ridiculous. The story is full of self-referential humor, with Aijo pointing out "wasted panels" and talking about how many pages the reader has had to plow through to get to a certain point.

It might stick to familiar romcom conventions, but at least *The 100 Girlfriends* is trying to do something a little different with them. It gets a lot of gags out of stretching the concept of harem manga to the max. If you enjoy meeting the love interest in a manga over and over again, you'll find plenty to love about *The 100 Girlfriends*. But you'd better love them all. Equally. (Brittany Vincent)

Manga Diary of a Male Porn Star

Have you ever wondered how porn stars get their start? Or what the daily life of someone just breaking into the business might be like? Kairuno Erefante creates a hilarious and relat-



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Kairuno Erefante

RATING
15+

able account of his experience in *Manga Diary of a Male Porn Star*, a refreshing and honest view of what adult film hopefuls go through on their way to doing the deed, professionally.

Kairuno's story begins with him as a down-on-his-luck, recently divorced bachelor. Hanging out with his friends one night, he meets up with an acquaintance who offers him work on the set of an

adult film. Needing the money, and curious about what that world is like, Kairuno gives it a try. He's immediately enticed by seeing beautiful women naked, but he soon becomes serious about putting in the hard work and perseverance to make it in the industry.

This journal-style series could be played just for laughs or cheesecake, but it's fascinatingly educational, especially for readers who have no idea what goes into shooting the hyper-polished, heavily edited pornography that goes to the mass market. Kairuno depicts himself in the most nonsexual manner possible, as a nondescript hot dog-like creature. Other characters, including the women who star opposite him as he works his way up from performing small-fry tasks to full-fledged sex scenes, are drawn with more realism. But this story isn't about looking great or titillating the audience. It's about sharing experiences.

Manga Diary of a Male Porn Star is full of laughs, genuine moments between Kairuno and his coworkers, and a sense of pride for a man who had to pick up the pieces of his life and start down a completely different road. And if you're into it, it can be kind of sexy, too. Who doesn't



MANGA DIARY OF A MALE PORN STAR: © KAERUNO EREFANTE 2020

want to think about helping bring pleasure to other people? **Recommended.** (Brittany Vincent)



PUBLISHER
Seven Seas Entertainment

STORY AND ART
Yuuma

RATING
13+

The Girl I Want is So Handsome!

Hinami Ayukawa just started high school, and she's already in love. The object of her affection? The handsome Shiki Hiiiragi, who's super into basketball. Hinami isn't exactly very athletic herself, but she's enthralled by Shiki's charm. Before she knows it, she's managing the basketball team while still trying to refine the confes-

sion of love she wants to deliver to Shiki. Nothing went right when Hinami tried to be honest the first time, but she has plenty of opportunities to make it right while hanging out with Shiki and her teammates.

In *The Girl I Want is So Handsome!* we watch an innocent teenage girl spiral as she falls ever deeper in love with her attractive senpai. Throughout this lighthearted queer romance, Hinami plays the familiar role of the shy but friendly girl who's desperate to get closer to her cool, athletic crush instead of standing on the sidelines all the time. It's a tale as old as manga, but it's a lot of fun, even for readers who aren't usually into the silliness that comes attached to will-they-or-won't-they romantic relationships.

The manga's best running gag is that Hinami consistently deludes herself into thinking situations have played out in a different way than they actually have. She takes things out of context, makes grand assumptions, and fantasizes about events that haven't happened. Watching her come to terms with reality can be extremely entertaining, even if it's at her detriment as she

realizes that she's yet again failed to catch Shiki's eye.

Much of the story is predicated on how long it'll take for two characters who clearly complement the other to come together, which could grow tiring if drawn out for too long. Fortunately, *The Girl I Want* reaches a satisfying conclusion in one omnibus volume. It's a delicate dance between funny situations and more tender moments between two individuals who yearn to be less lonely and find someone who understands them, but it can be something of a slow burn.

The Girl I Want is So Handsome! is just about as wholesome as titles in this genre get, which makes it a great foundational title for anyone interested in LGBTQ+ romcoms. It's carefree,



THE GIRL I WANT IS SO HANDSOME!: © 2019 YUUMA

honest, and at times absolutely hilarious. It never delves into dark territory and gives off a bubbly shojo vibe. It isn't particularly groundbreaking, but true love never has to be. It just has to feel good. (Brittany Vincent)

SPACE ODDITY!

By Michael Goldstein

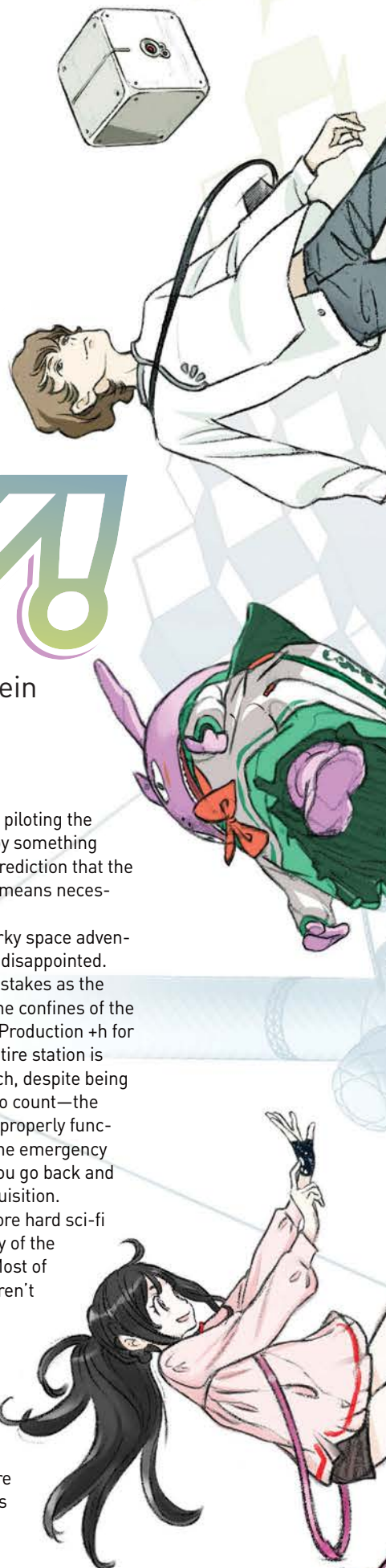
Nearly fifteen years ago, Mitsuo Iso—a beloved animator, storyteller, and director—had been all over the place. While he started work on a Gundam production, he is primarily known for his key animation in such projects as *Evangelion*, *Kill Bill*, *Ghost in the Shell*, as well as several Studio Ghibli movies. But he really didn't launch into the spotlight until he created, wrote, and directed the 26-episode 2207 anime *Den-noh Coil* (you can read more about this little show in the side bar), which might as well be called "Science is Great: The Series." I, however, have never watched this series, so you can imagine my befuddlement as to what all the hype was about regarding Iso's latest anime (technically, it's a miniseries), *The Orbital Children*. All that I was aware of going into the six-episode series (which, interestingly, was originally just two parts) and that it was, from my understanding, a spiritual successor to Ino's predecessor series. Do what I wanted to know was if *The Orbital Children* was able to successfully get its point across in just six 30-minute episodes.

Iso's latest production focuses on a group of five children living in the near future (roughly two decades after the events of *Den-noh Coil*, apparently) getting tangled in a life-or-death situation. The Earth-born children Taiyo, Mina, and Hiroshi—a hacker, a space YouTuber, and a geek, respectively—recently won a competition to visit the commercial space station Anshin, which is inhabited by the last two lunar colony-born children, hacker Touya and terminally ill childhood friend Konoha (their fragile physicality is always at the forefront). The two off-Earth children are poised to welcome the Earth-born tour group aboard Anshin, when the space station's AI shorts out and a strange asteroid passes too close for comfort. With nothing but limited oxygen, light, and gravity—not to mention an encounter

with a terrorist group called John Doe who are piloting the asteroid toward Earth to destroy it, as guided by something called the Seven Poem, which contains an AI prediction that the planet's population must be decreased by any means necessary in order to save it.

Right away, anyone coming in here for a quirky space adventure with no stakes whatsoever will be grossly disappointed. The early part of the film pretty much sets the stakes as the kids try to survive as they maneuver through the confines of the station. Major props to the production folks at Production +h for really knocking the ball out of the park. The entire station is constructed in a very convincing manner, which, despite being well designed, has too many physical failings to count—the bulkheads meant to prevent oxygen loss don't properly function, there's junk all over the place, and even the emergency shelters are poorly stocked, especially when you go back and look at the in-world history of commercial acquisition.

One thing the series really does well is explore hard sci-fi concepts with a more playful lens, as in, by way of the kids and the various technologies they carry. Most of the gadgets and gizmos shown in this series aren't too far a leap from some of the stuff we have today. Case in point, Mina's constantly streaming smart glove, in addition to her obsession with self-promotion in life-threatening situations, would make her fit right into today's TikTok era. That's another thing, too; *The Orbital Children* isn't afraid to let its characters be annoying, albeit not in the more obvious obnoxious way. Moralistic inflexibility is just as much a hindrance to everything as





The Orbital Children is an out-of-this-world anime in all the right ways.

THE ORBITAL CHILDREN
TAKES A DEEP
LOOK AT AI,
MORALITY,
AND RESPON-
SIBILITY,
ALONG WITH
THAT CLASSIC
CONUNDRUM:
"IS IT WORTH
SACRIFICING
THE FEW FOR
THE NEEDS OF
THE MANY?"



nihilism born from terminal illness, but eventually they come to a compromise for the sake of others. This is evident through the joining of their own distinct drones into a single entity.

The Orbital Children also has a deep exploration of AI, morality, and responsibility that makes it quite incredible, particularly of the classic conundrum: "Is it worth sacrificing the few for the needs of the many?" Luckily, our fun-sized heroes answer with a firm no. Touya's characterization of being open to idea of wiping out a part of the Earth population is a firm reminder of how isolated youth can get swept up in ecofascist rhetoric while still sounding logical. Not only that, but the series also rejects the idea of Konoha, being the terminally ill one, sacrificing herself to make a connection with the AI, as the other characters fight to save her. The idea happening in all of this is that humans as individual people lose their intrinsic value under the notion of humanity, which can be considered as the bigger picture; as such, losing a few humans doesn't matter as long as it's about the bigger picture. But the series rejects this notion—every life is important and no one life should deserve to die just because of some greater good.

The second half of the series is a very different beast from the first, with plot threads previously woven coming back together to weave a unique picture of speculative fiction in such a way that it no longer resembles a disaster.



Instead, what we get is more of an examination on mankind's future and intelligence in general, specifically the intelligence of AI (particularly its definition of humans and humanity) and the various attitudes toward it—observance control or uninhibited freedom. Ultimately, the true path is a compromise. It's certainly a level up for most run-of-the-mill science-literate films.

The Orbital Children provides plenty of food for thought, far more than you might be expecting. The structure of the entire series is very much a like a puzzle where every individual element serves multiple purposes that only become clear in hindsight. You might need to take a few breaks just to sit and think about some of the concepts, but what the show ultimately says: humans are changed by technology, which influences the technology they create, which ultimately influence the next generation, but you can't limit anyone's experiences without trusting them first. And I won't spoil how everything ends, because it's one heck of a knockout, but what you have here is a well-thought-out package that's definitely worth your time.

The Orbital Children is available from Netflix.

WHAT IS DEN-NOSH COIL?

With amazing timing, Netflix dropped the entirety of Iso's lauded series *Den-noh Coil* before the debut of *The Orbital Children*. Before Google Glass was ever a thing, in the distant year of 2007, *Den-nosh Coil* hypothesizes a world in which AR glass have shaped and molded a thriving digital dimension living alongside our own, or rather, putting a virtual dimension over a real dimension. You can do all sorts of things, including raising your own virtual pets. Daikoku City, the setting, has become a testing ground for city-wide virtual infrastructure.

Yuko Okonogi, the protagonist, quickly gets involved with other kids who are deeply immersed in the virtual environment. It's all fun and games until some major secrets begin to surface.

Den-noh Coil seems to be more interested in the glitches, viruses, and bugs that run amok in the virtual shadows and what happens when you pay too much attention to the virtual world instead of the real world. And with down-to-earth character designs and a muted color palette courtesy of Madhouse, the show manages to capture the childlike sensibility and a nice balance between the wonderful and practical in such a visionary way that you can effectively introduce anime to people who don't normally watch it.



© MITSUO ISO / avex pictures / The Orbital Children's Production Committee



OTAKUUSA

MANGA PREVIEWS

We bet you know how this works already, but for those of you in the cheap seats, our manga section is printed in the correct Japanese format, to be read from right to left. Begin on the upper right of each two-page spread, reading each panel right-to-left, from the right page to the left. Click the arrow on the right side to advance to the following pages.



BOMBA!

PAGE 39

Story and Art by Osamu Tezuka

Tetsu is a seemingly normal student whose passionate love for his teacher turns violent in the most unexpected of ways when another suitor attempts to stand between them. Haunted by his family's past, Tetsu must learn to navigate his desire and quell his rage if he hopes to find peace and solace in his relationships with others.

Available now!



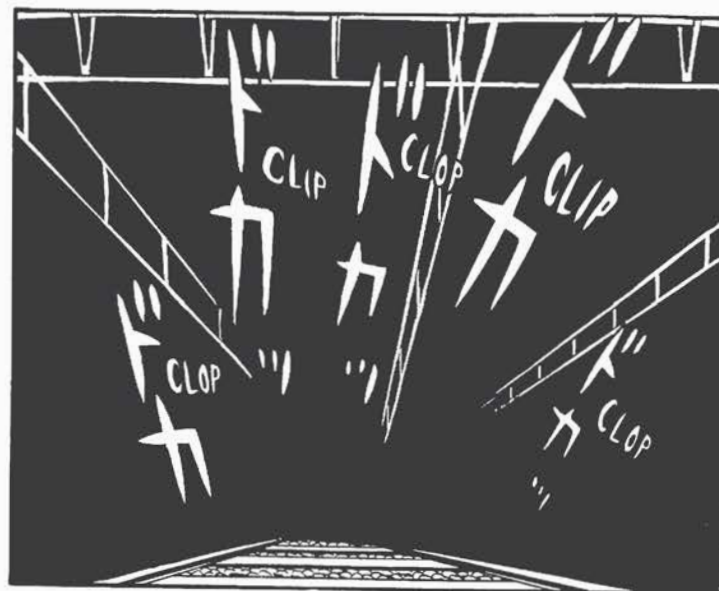
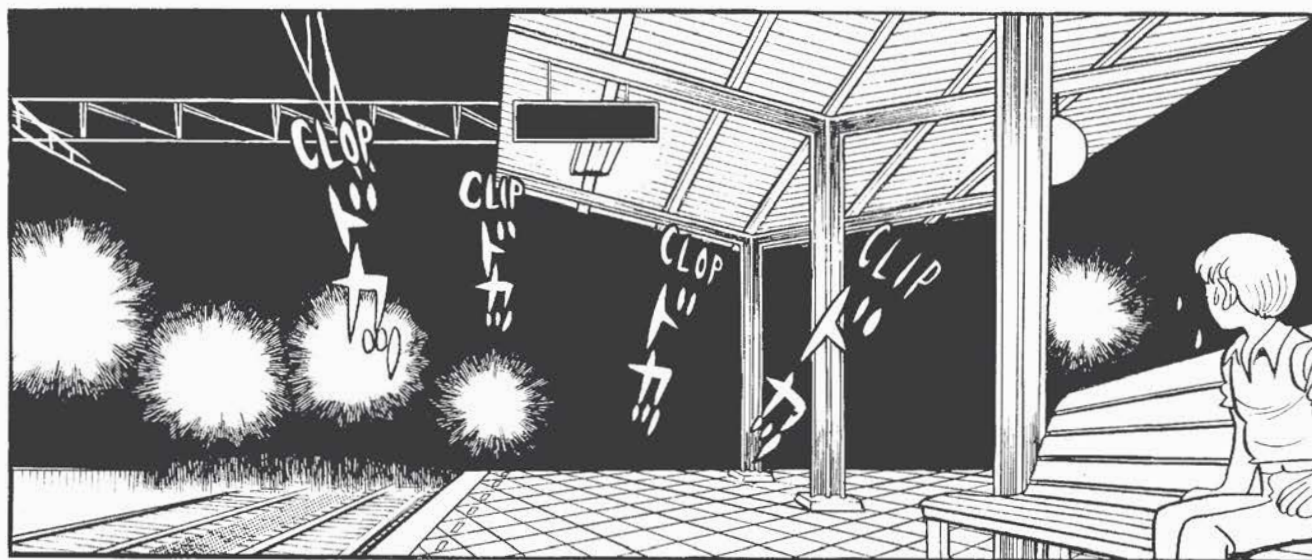
SUMMER TIME RENDERING

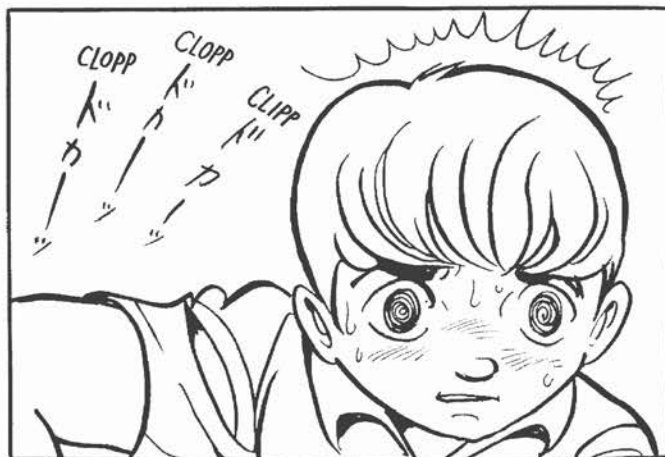
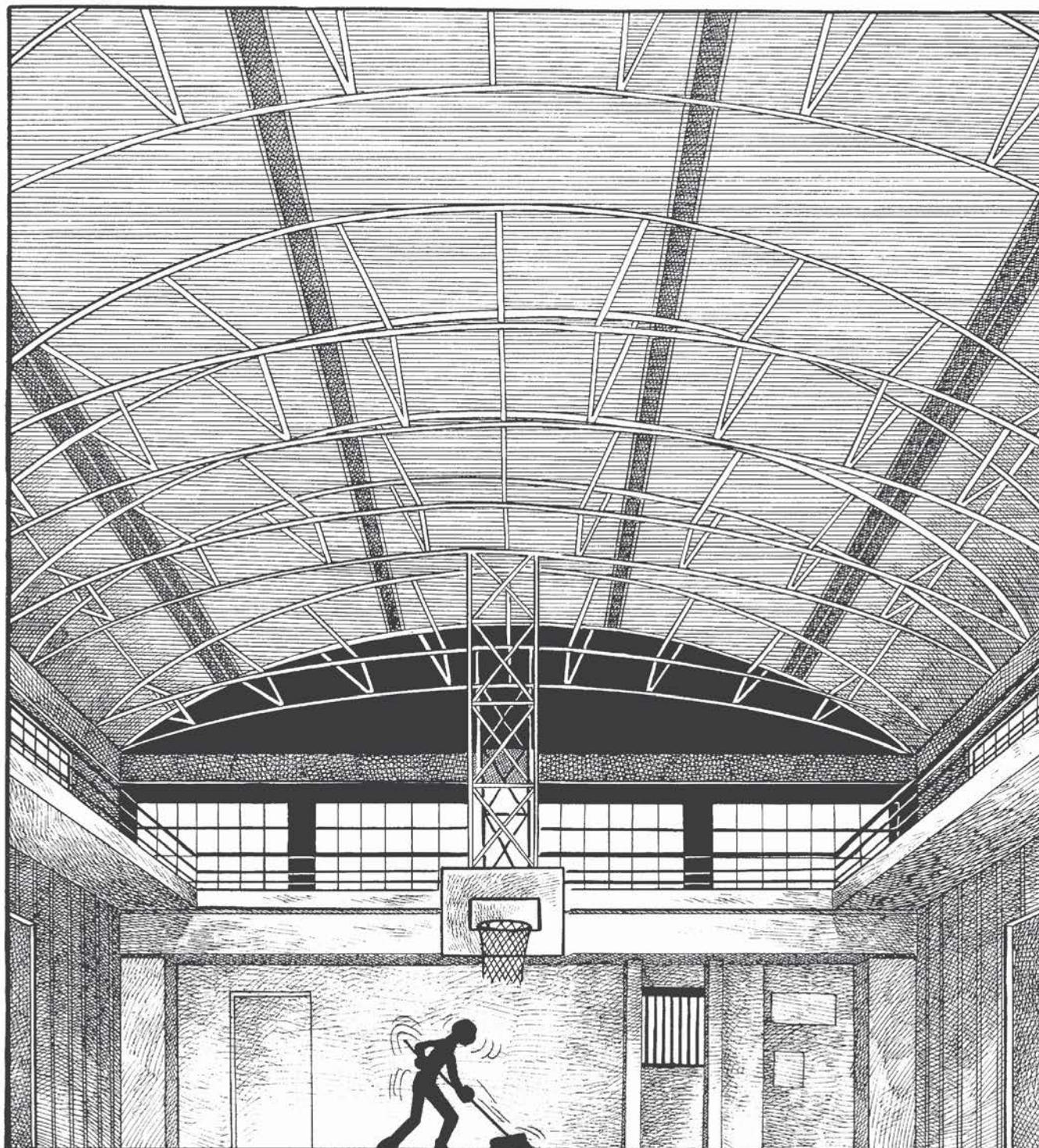
PAGE 61

Story and Art by Yasuki Tanaka

Hearing the news of the passing of his childhood friend Ushio, Shinpei returns to his hometown in the remote island of Hitogashima to attend her funeral. Little does he know that it is the beginning of a summer full of mystery and horror! No one is prepared for the time twisting adventures ahead that defy life and death!

Available now!





HUSH

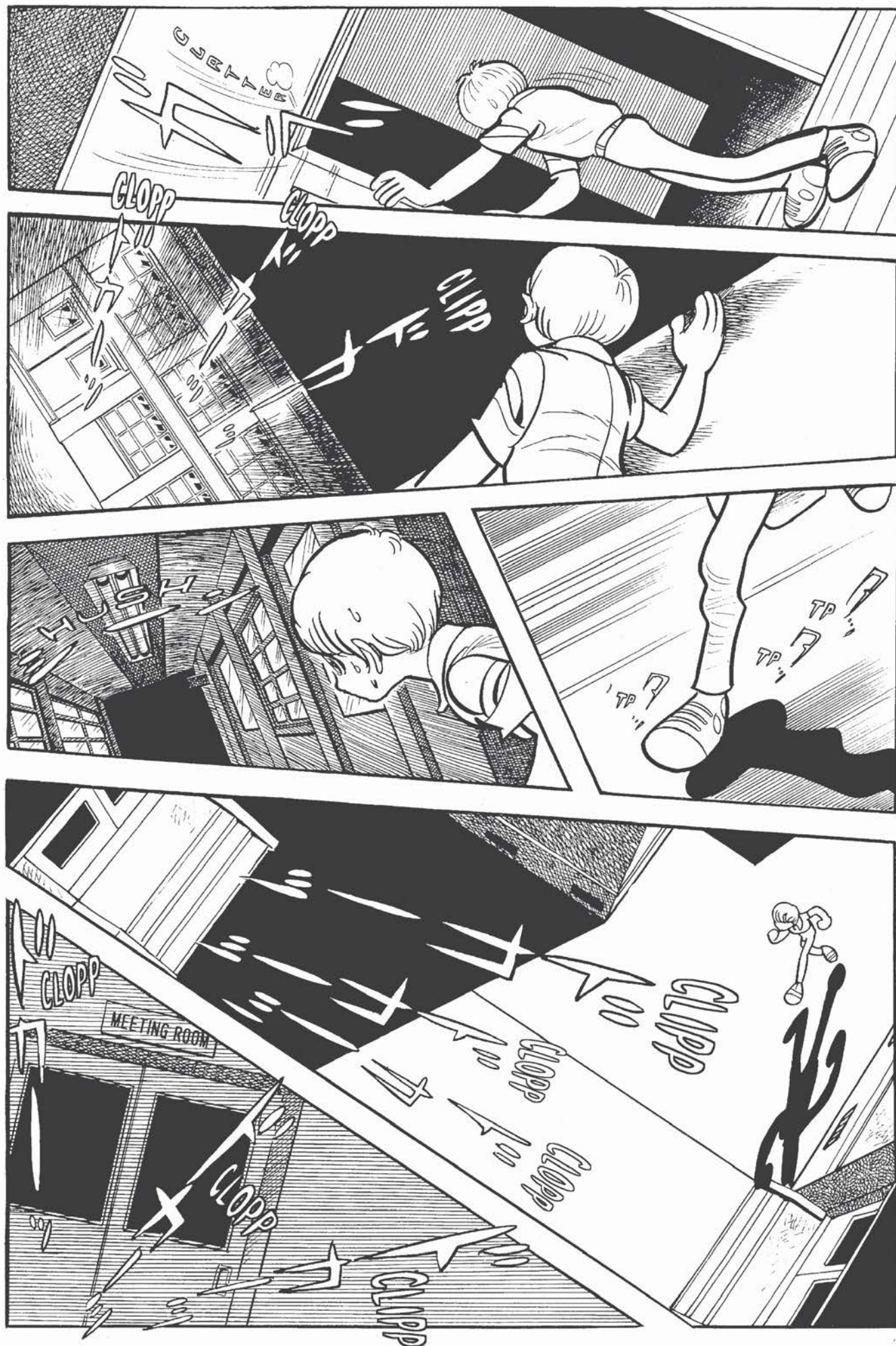
WAGH

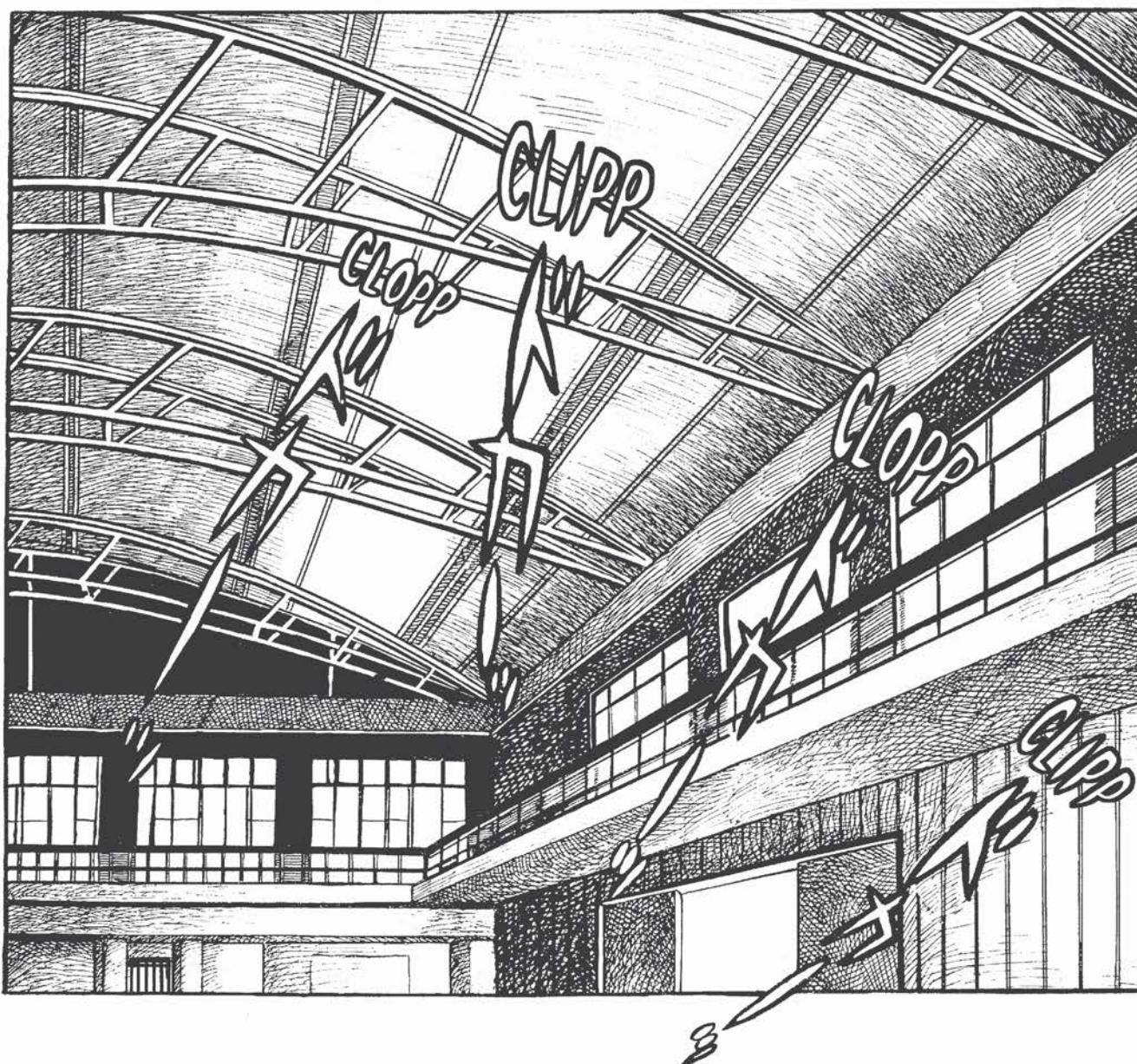
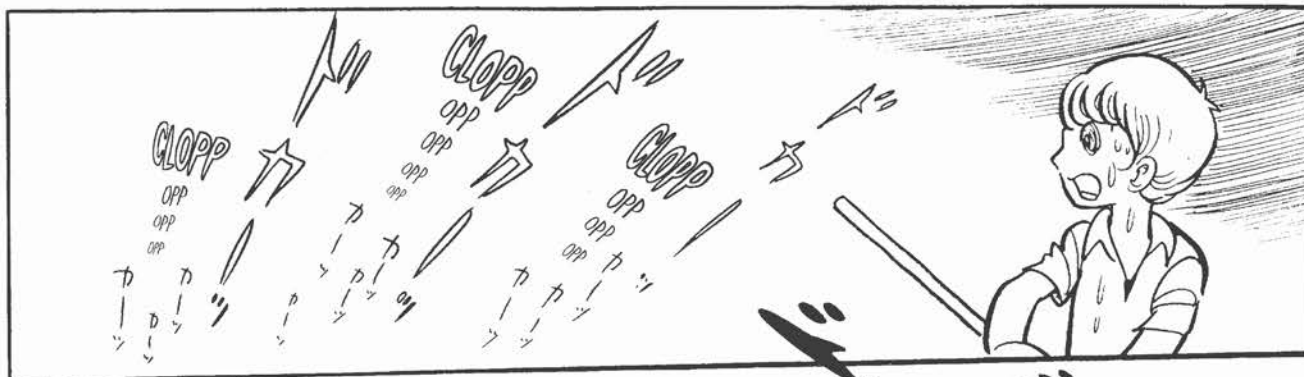
OPEN UP!

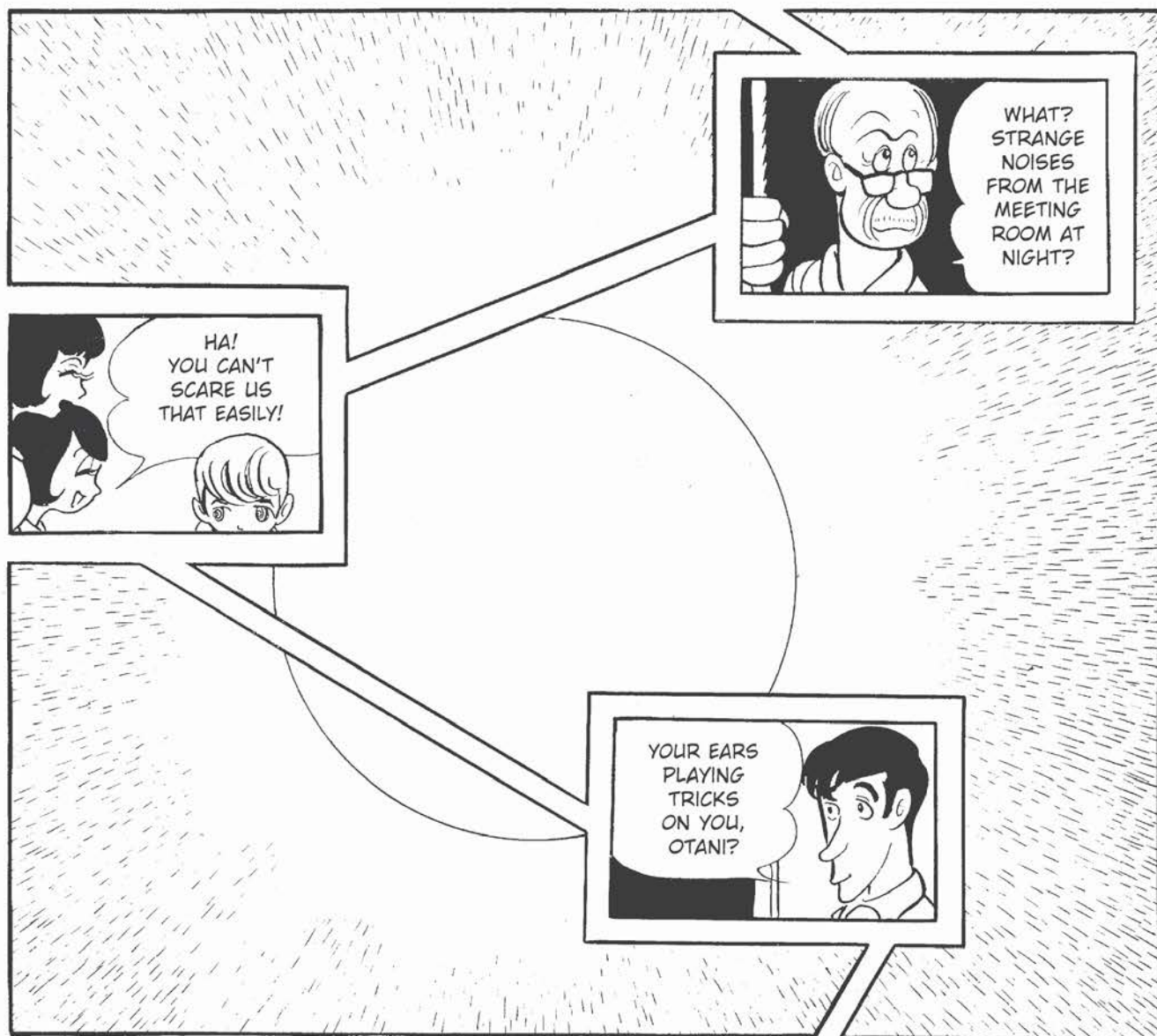
ASHHH

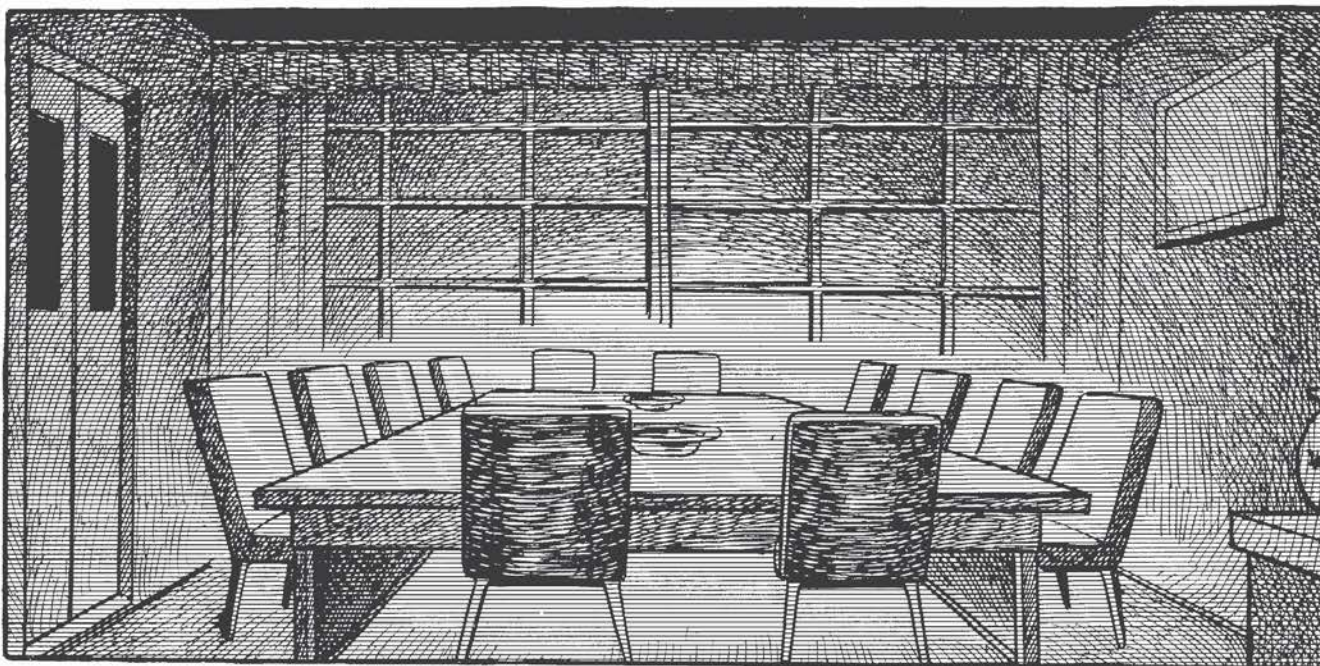
Kodansha - BOMBA!

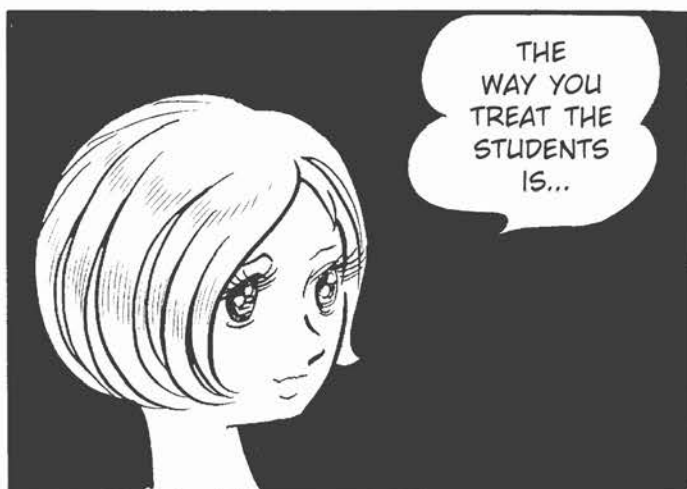
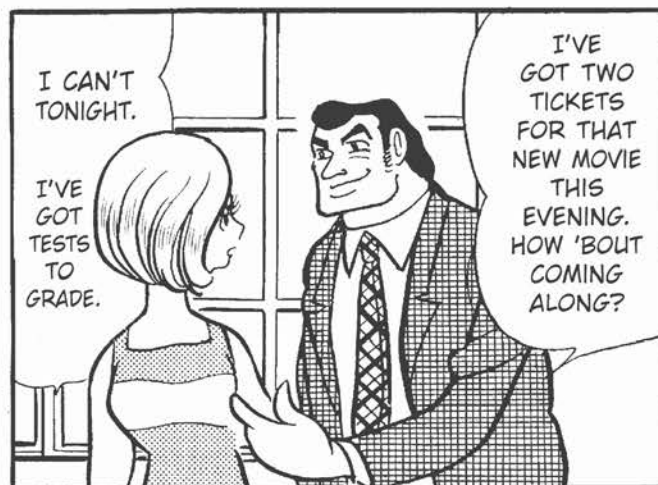
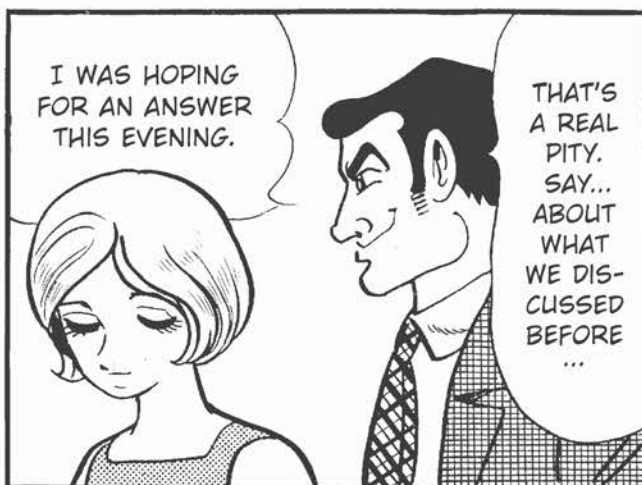
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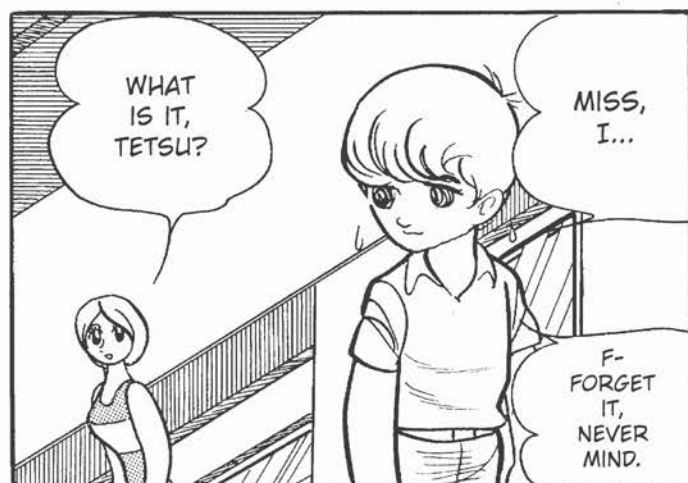
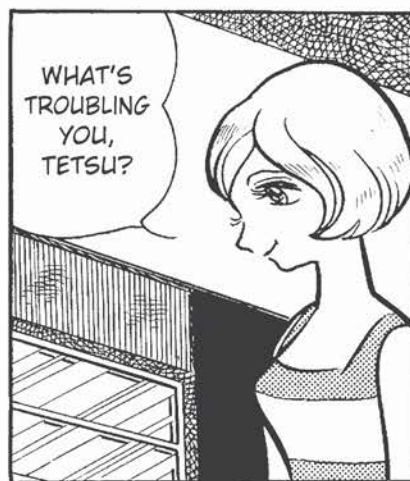
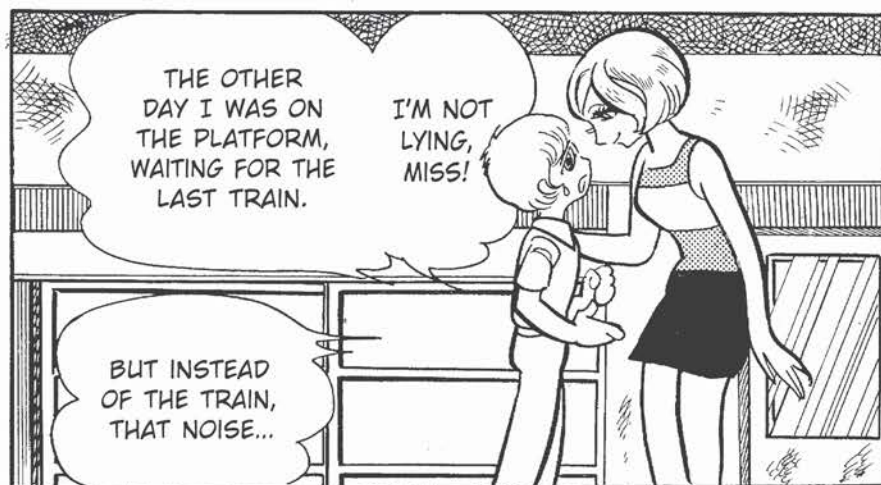


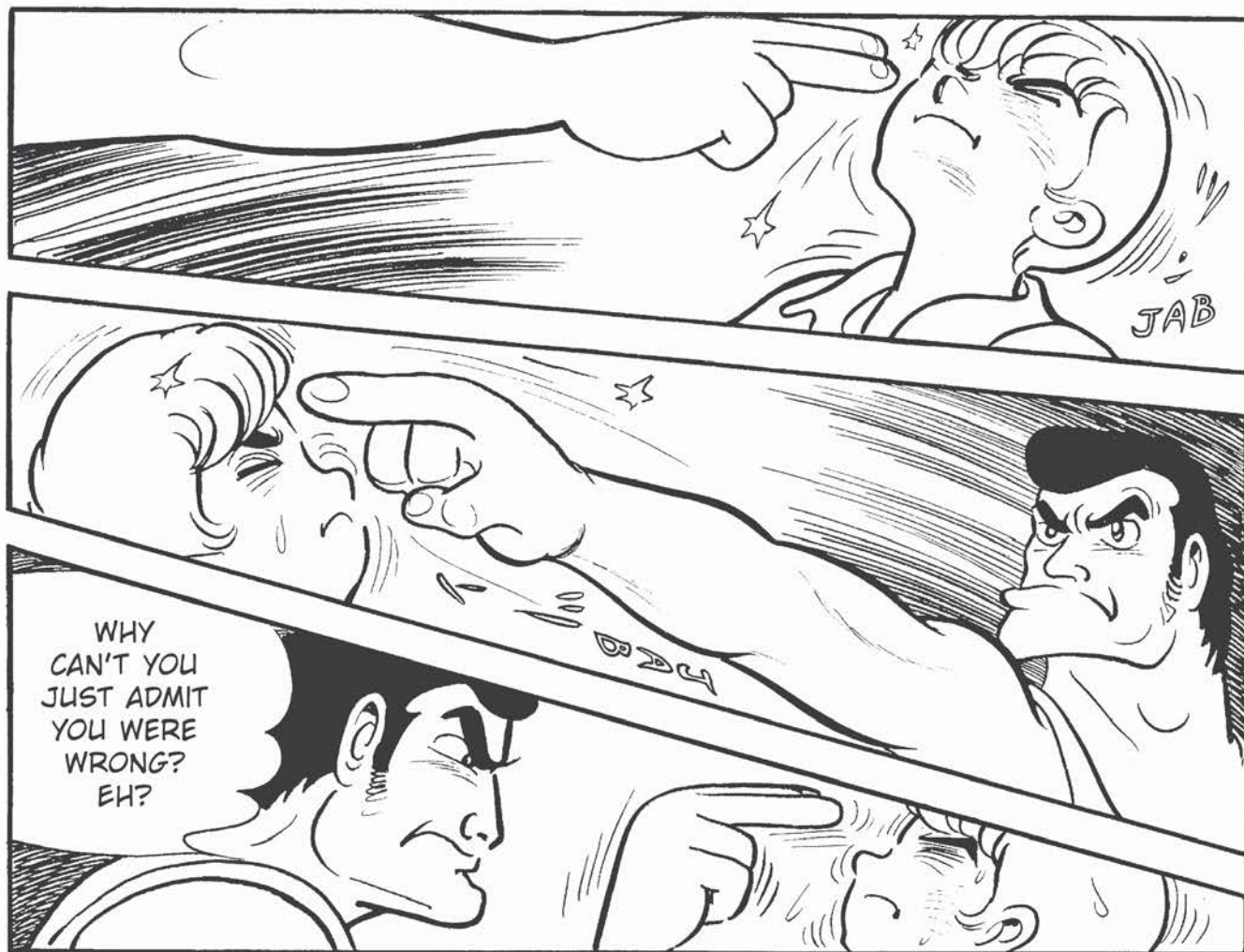


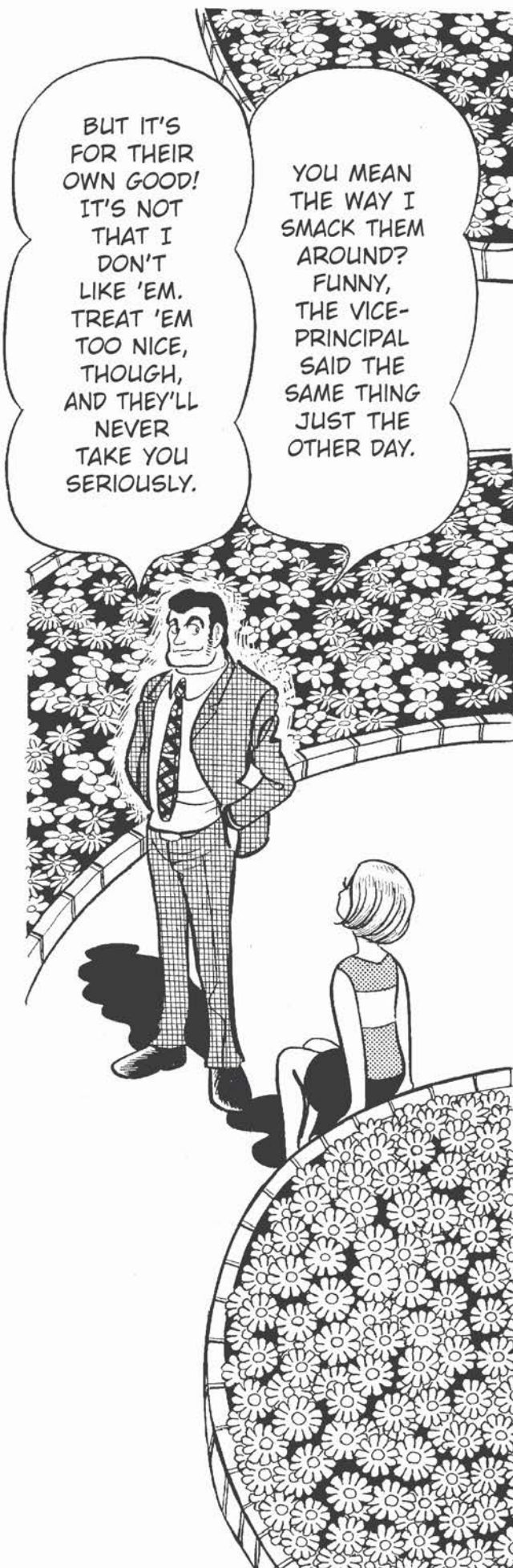
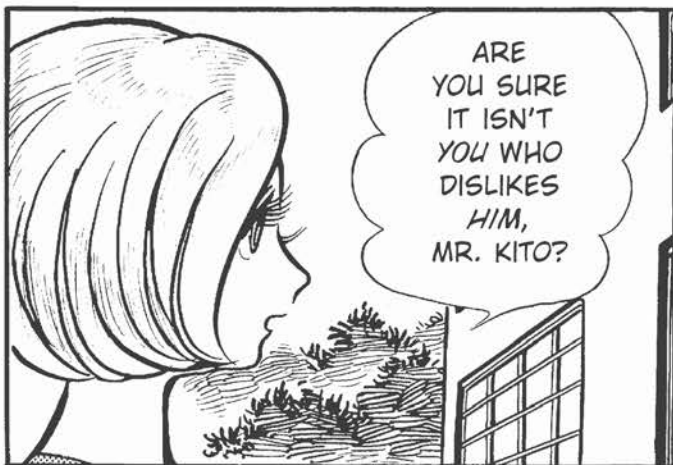
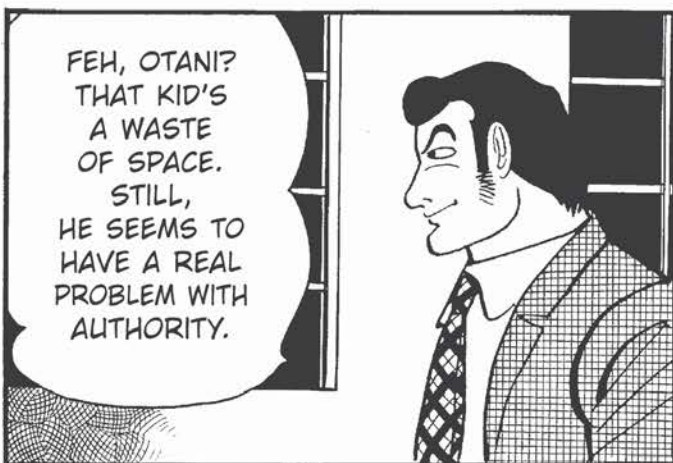


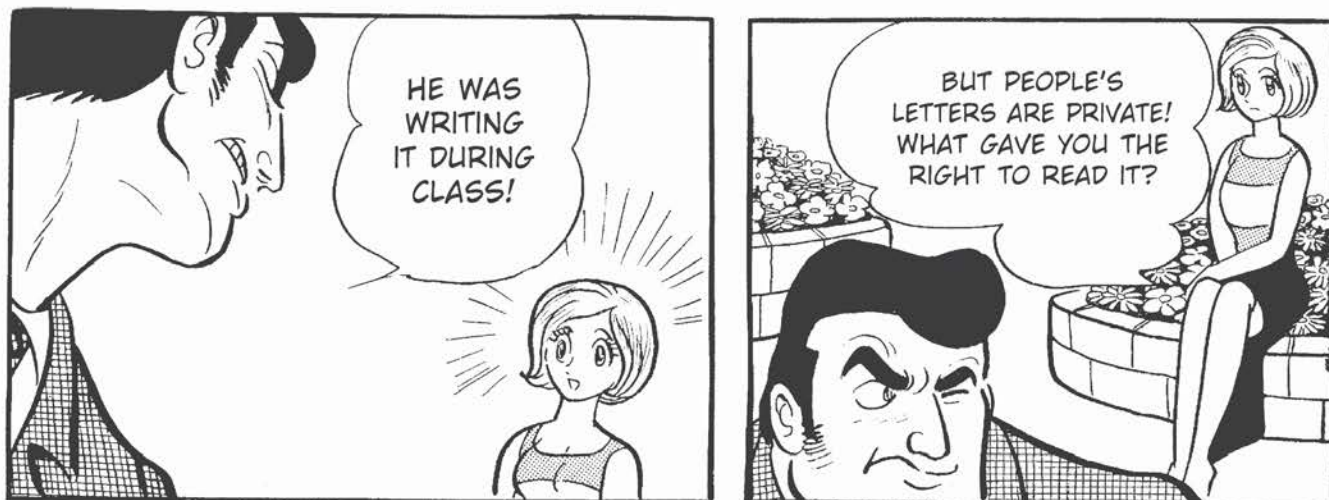
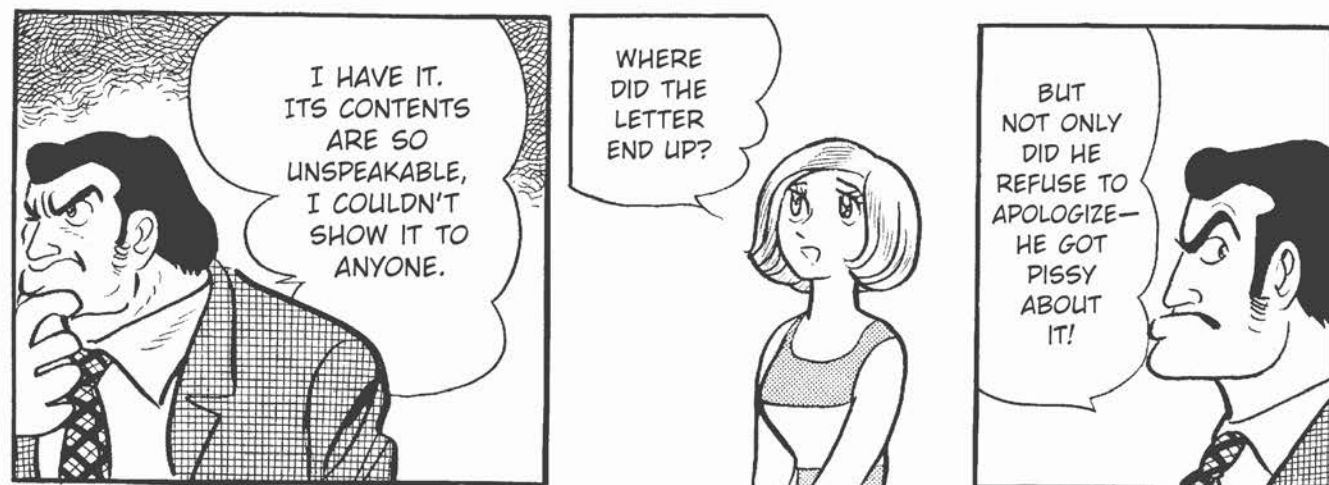
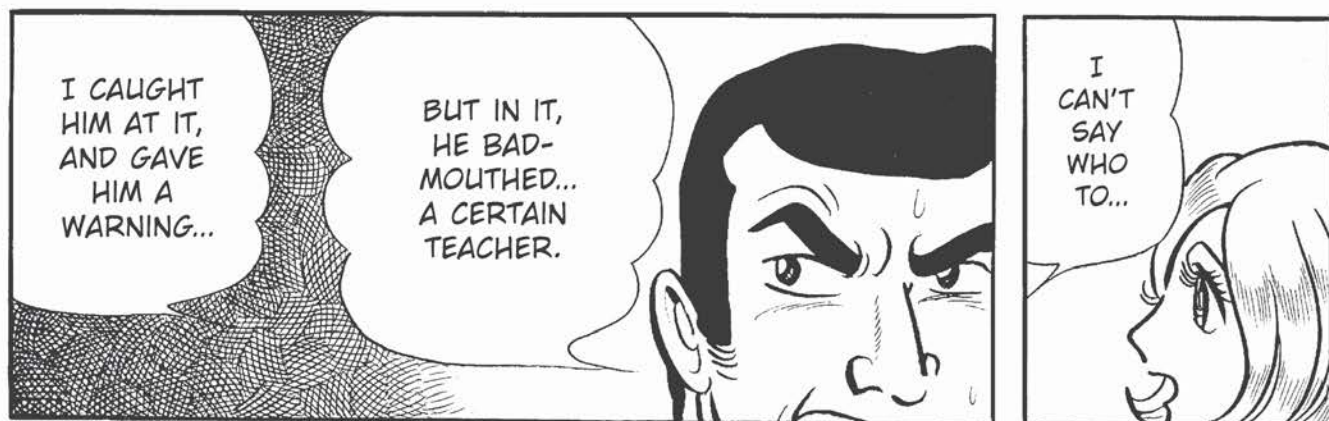


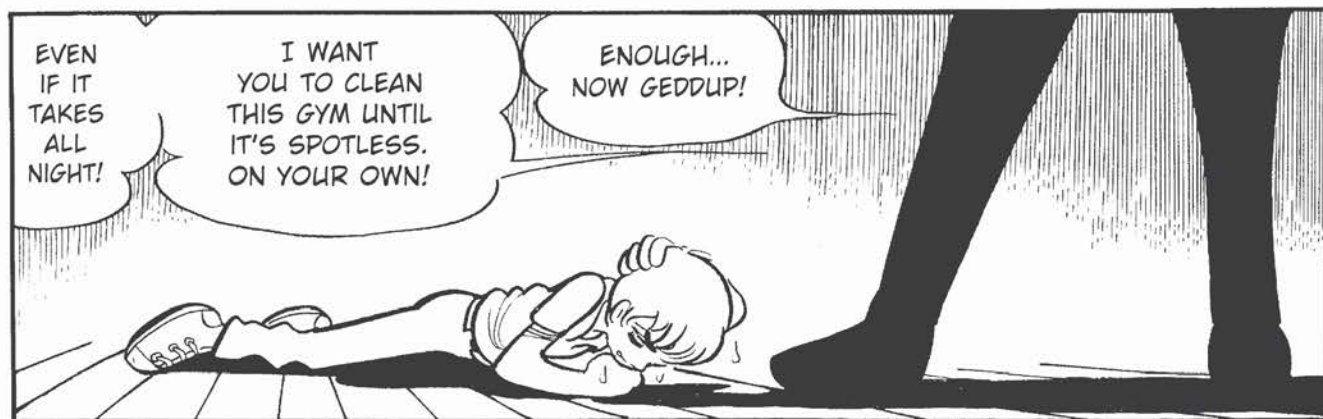


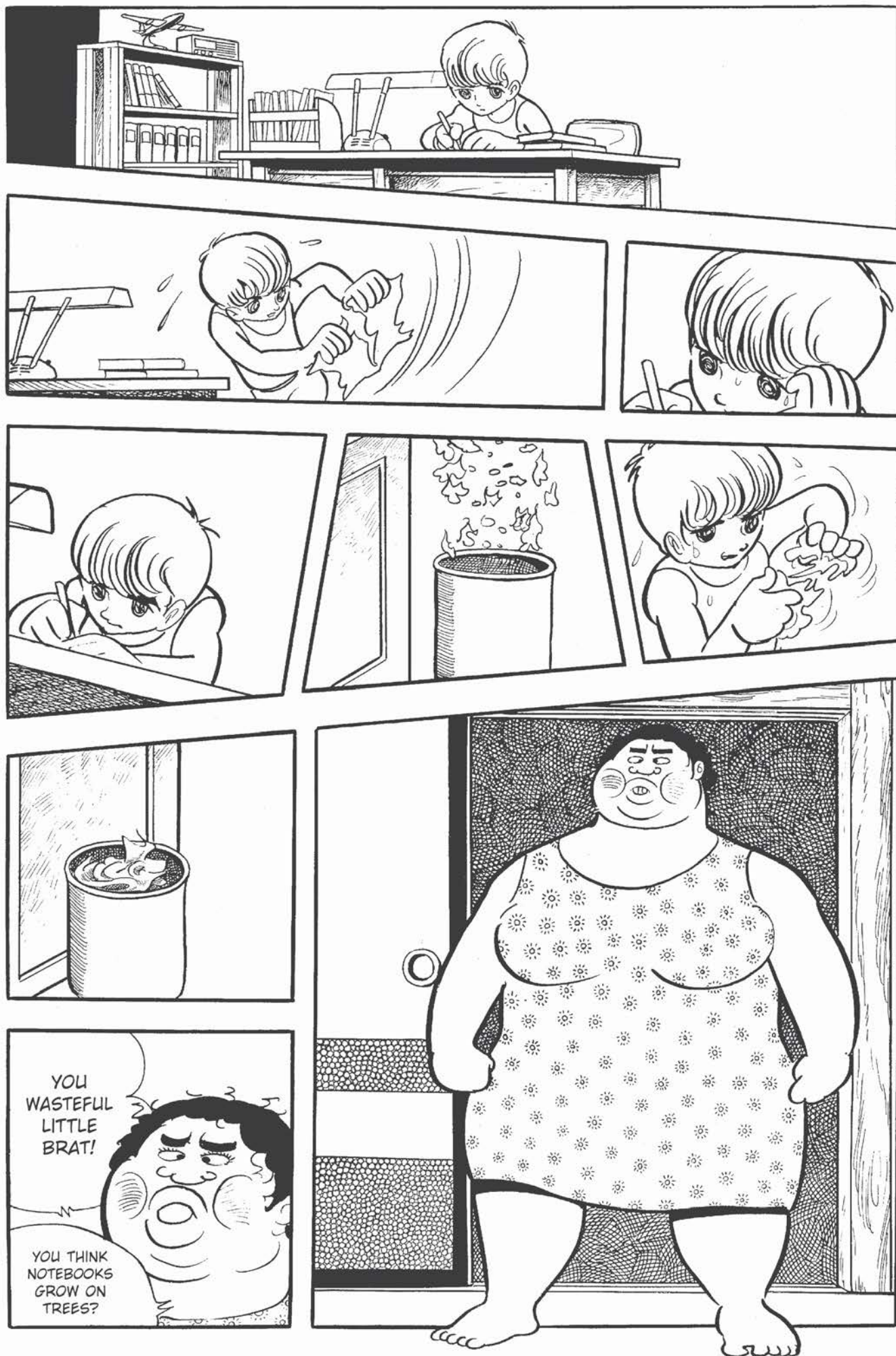










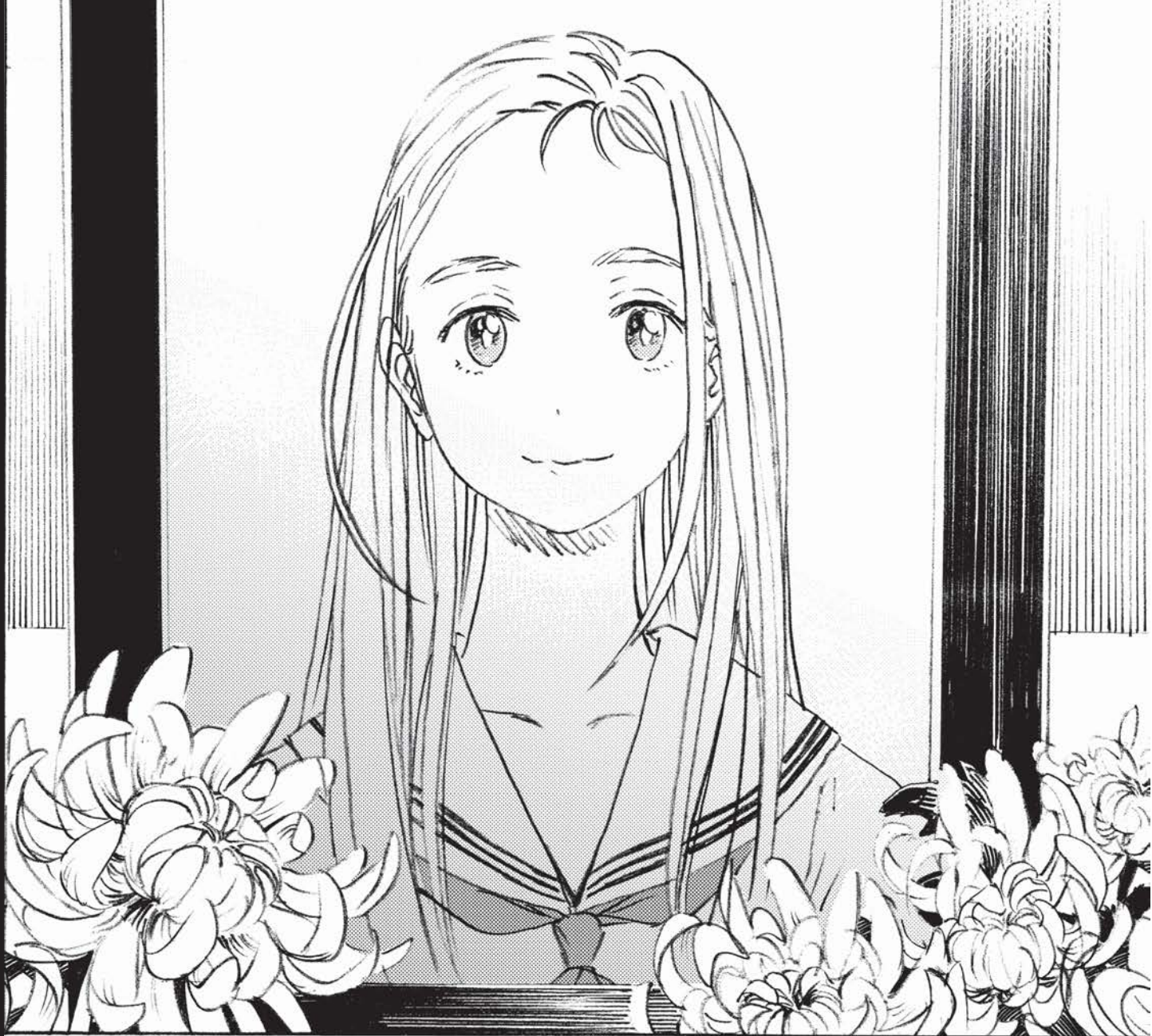






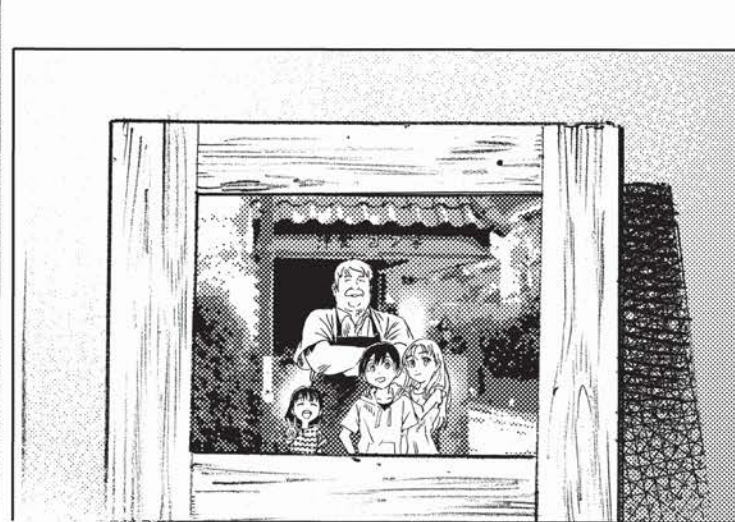
UDON - SUMMER TIME RENDERING

©2017 by Yasuki Tanaka/SHUEISHA Inc.





*SIGN = BISTRO KOFUNE

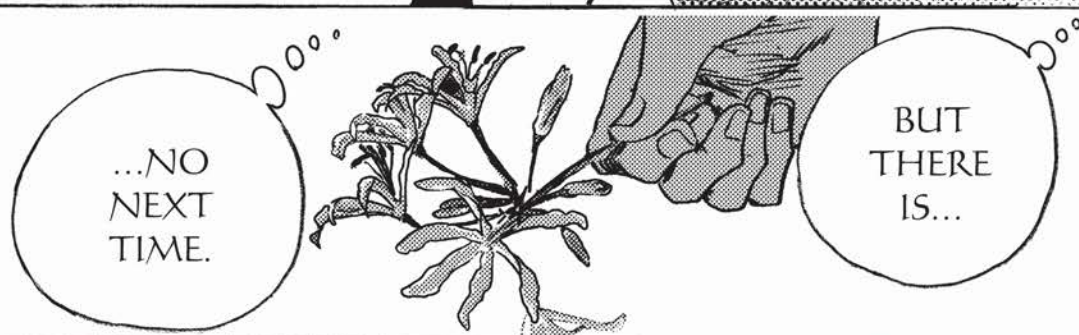


AND
I...DIDN'T.

I TOLD HER
NEXT TIME.

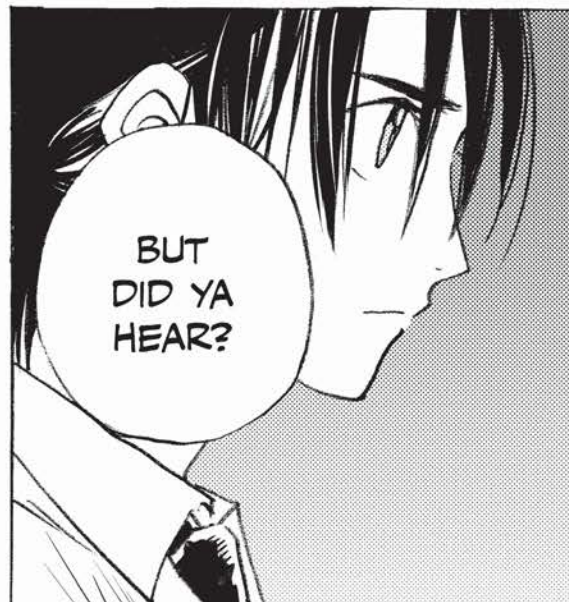
...USHIO
ASKED ME
TO MAKE
HER CURRY.

THE DAY
BEFORE I
LEFT THE
ISLAND...



...NO
NEXT
TIME.

BUT
THERE
IS...



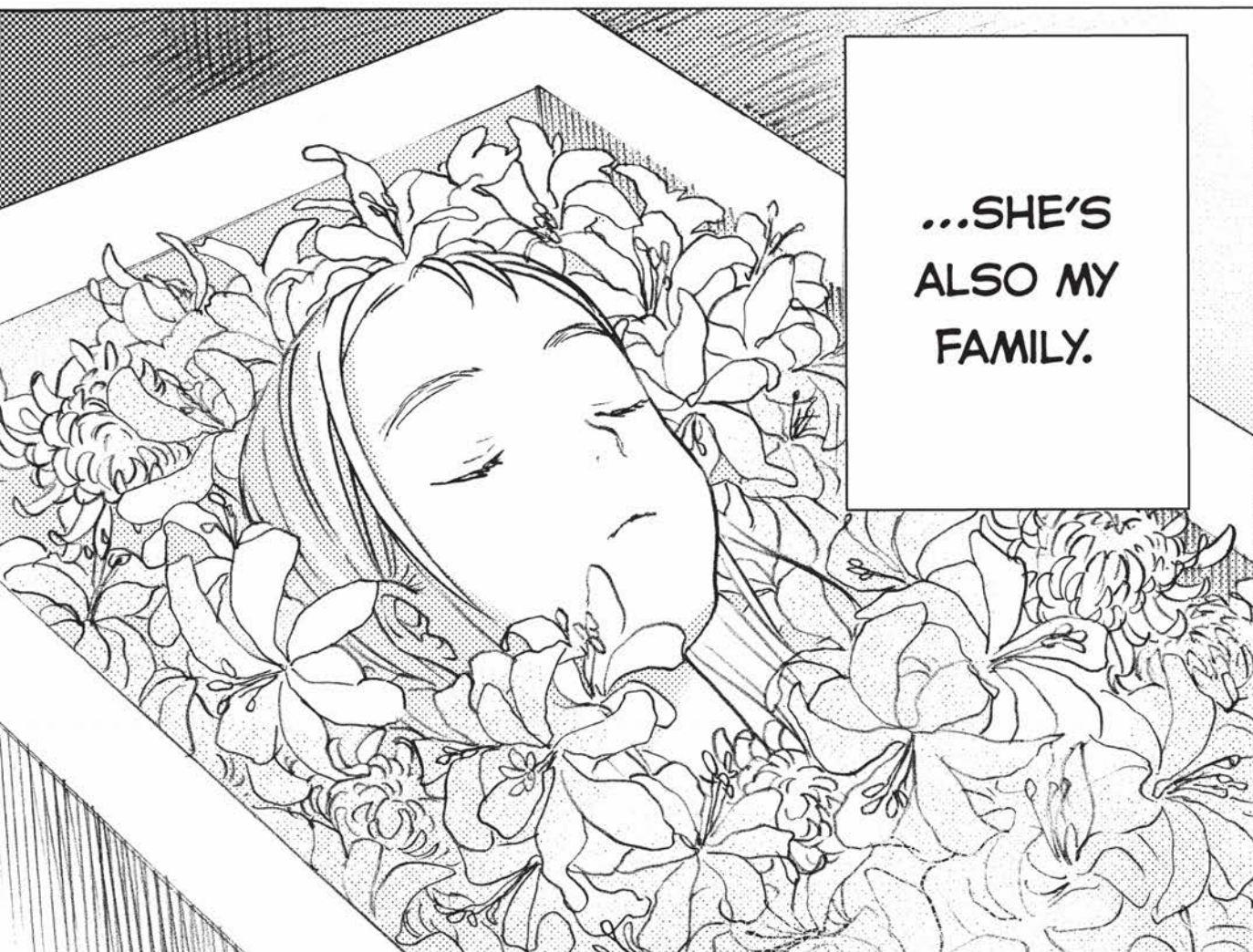
BUT
DID YA
HEAR?

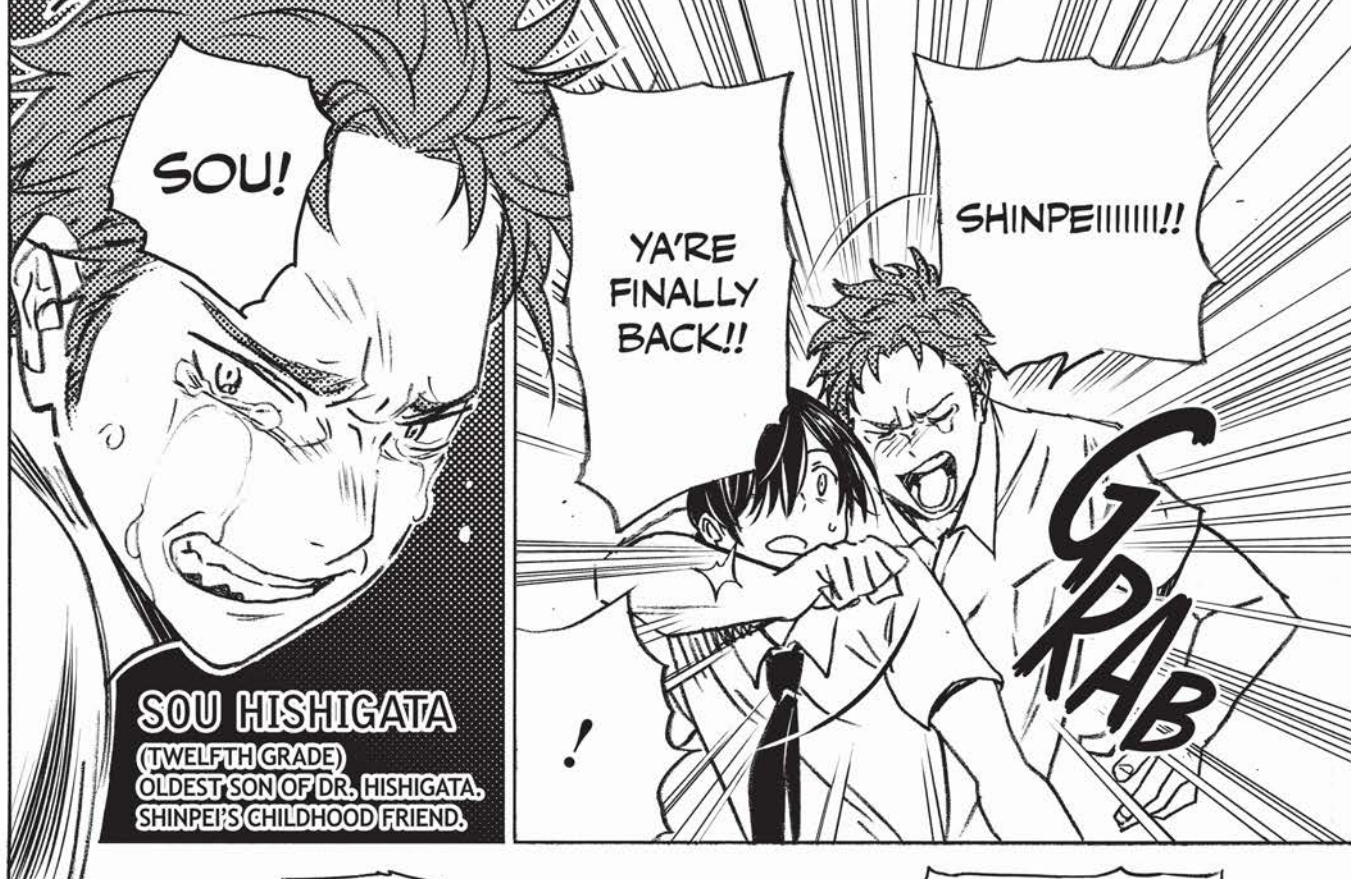


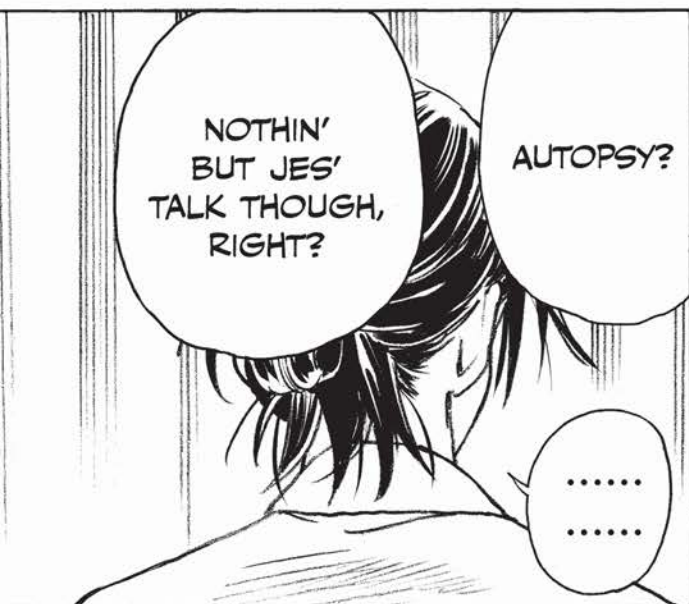
MUST
BE RIGHT
HARD FER
SHINPEI,
TOO.

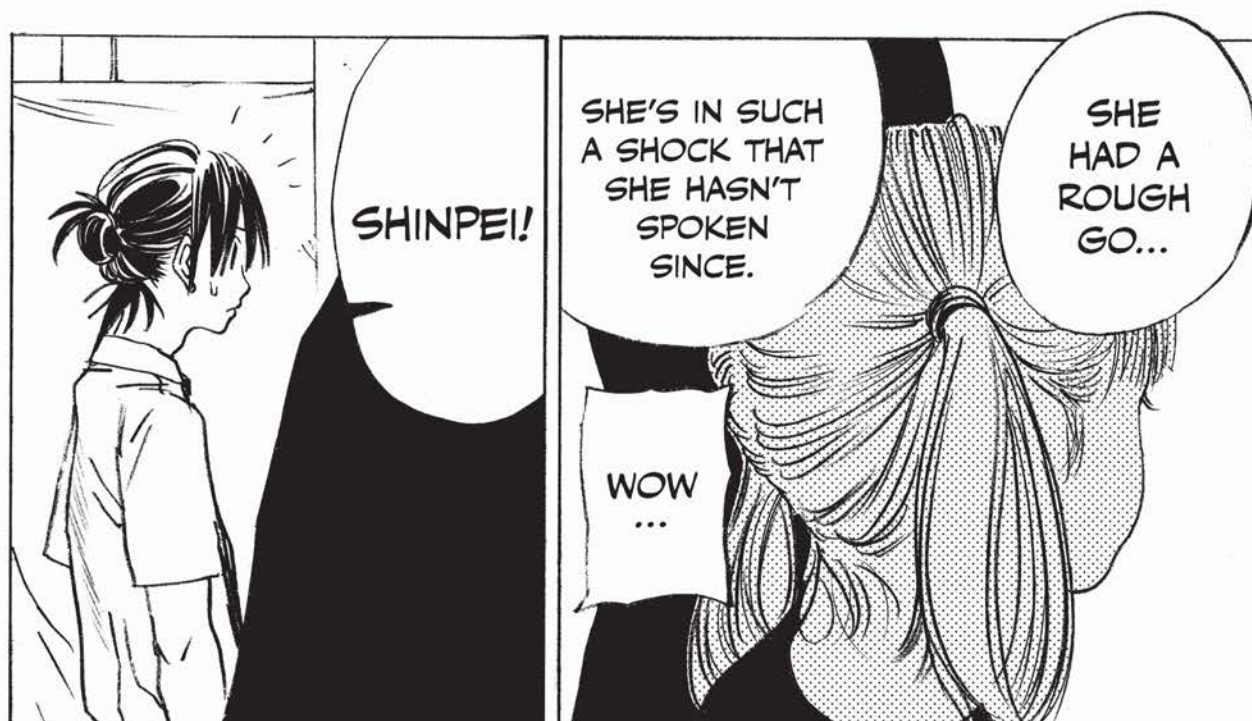
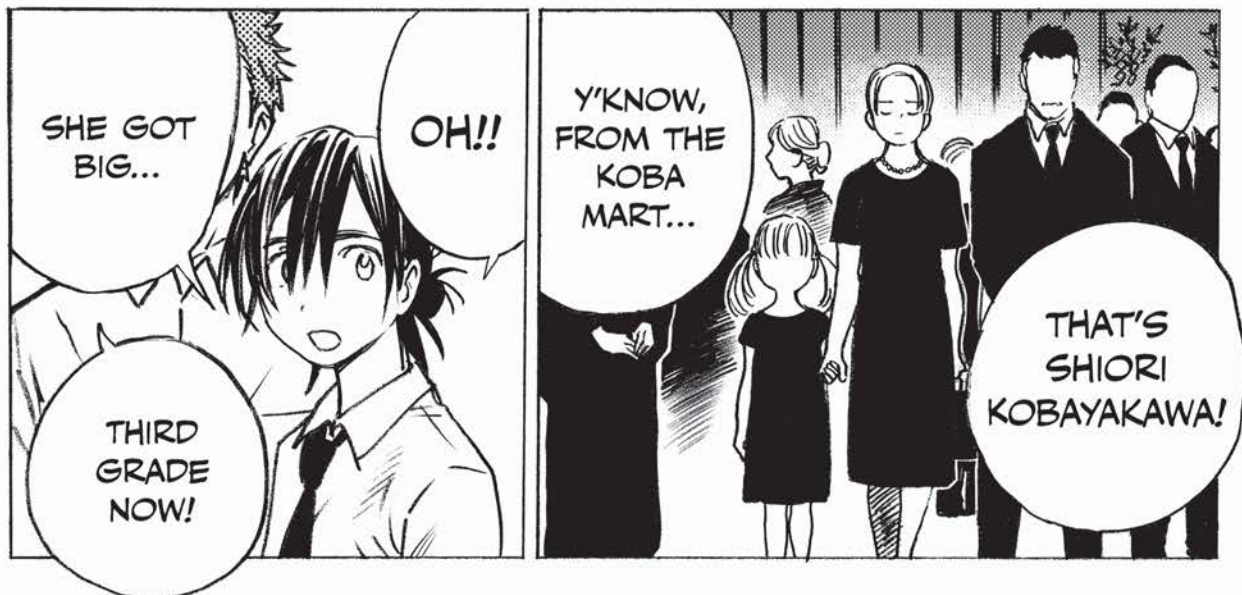
POOR
DEAR.

MM
HMM.





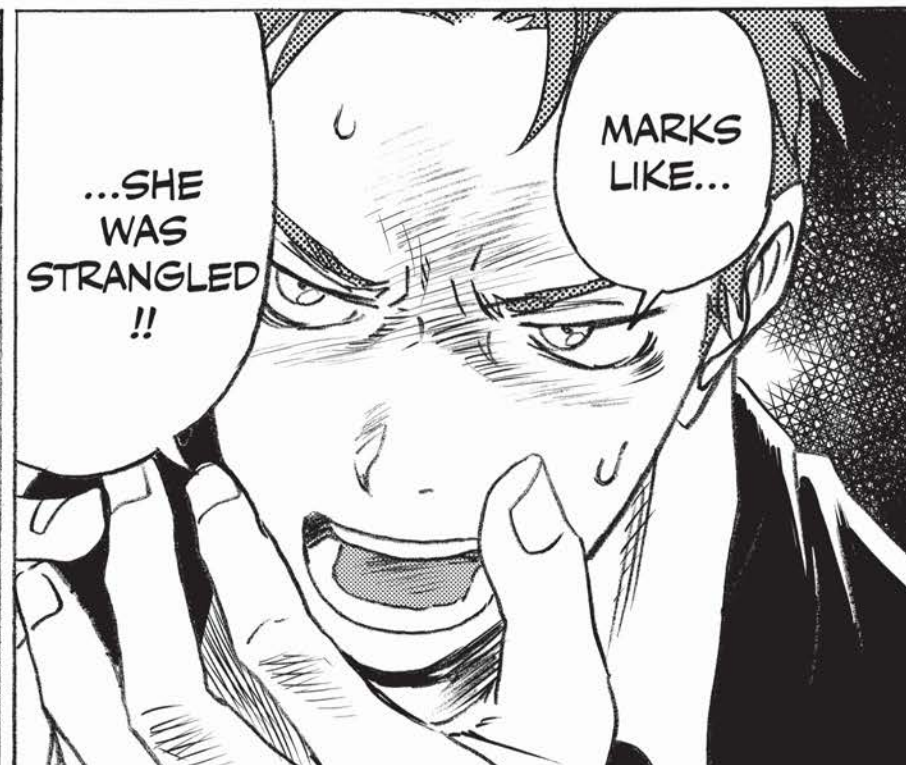






*BANNER = USHIO KOFUNE'S FUNERAL







USHIO
AND MIO.

ME AND
TOKIKO.

PLUS
SHIORI AND
A COUPLE OF
HER FRIENDS.
SO SEVEN
OF US.

WE WERE...
HANGIN' OUT AT
THE BEACH BEHIND
THE ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL. THE ONE
TOURISTS DON'T
KNOW.

THAT
DOESN'T
MAKE
SENSE!!

WHAT
DO YOU
MEAN?!

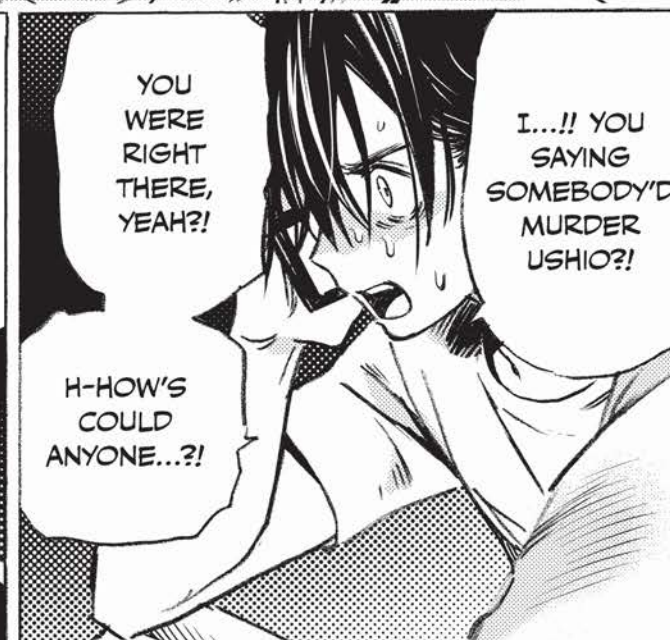
SHIORI GOT
WASHED OUT.
SHE WAS
DROWNIN'.

USHIO
NOTICED
FIRST. SHE
GRABBED A
FLOAT AND
WENT AFTER
HER...

TRIED
TALKIN'
TO SHIORI,
BUT SHE
LOST HER
VOICE...

I
KNOW...

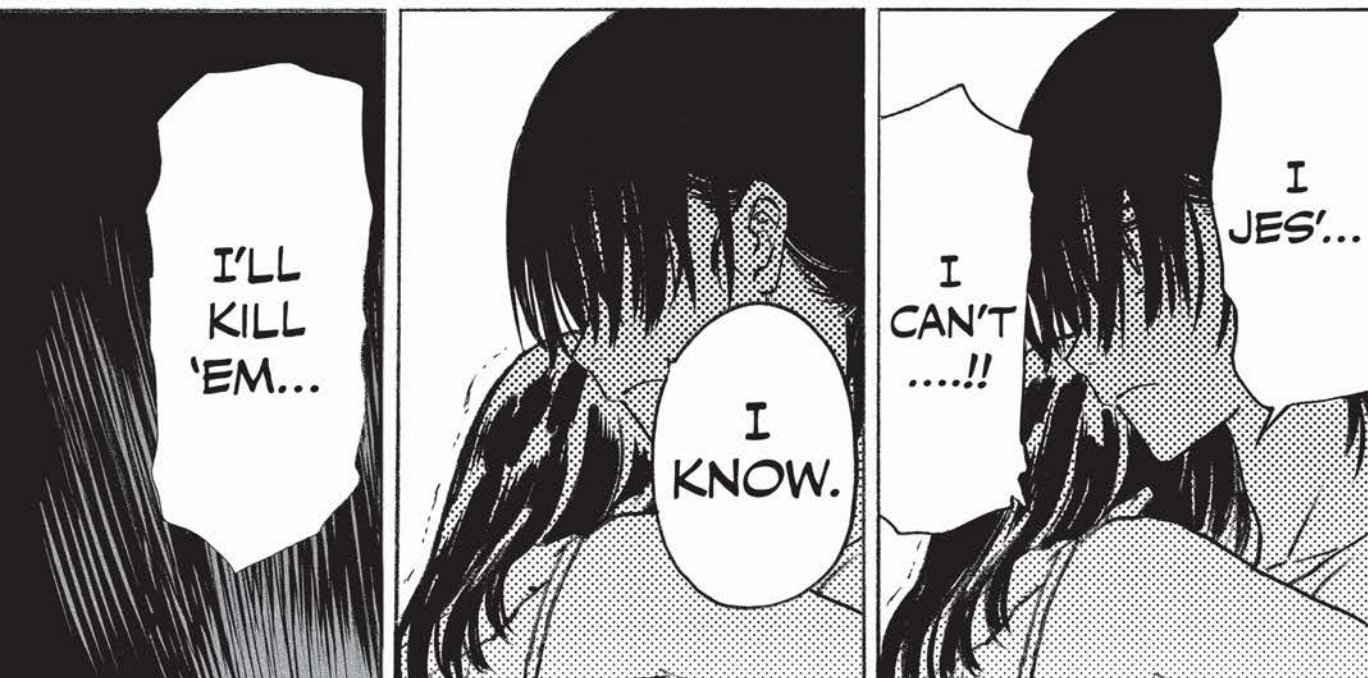
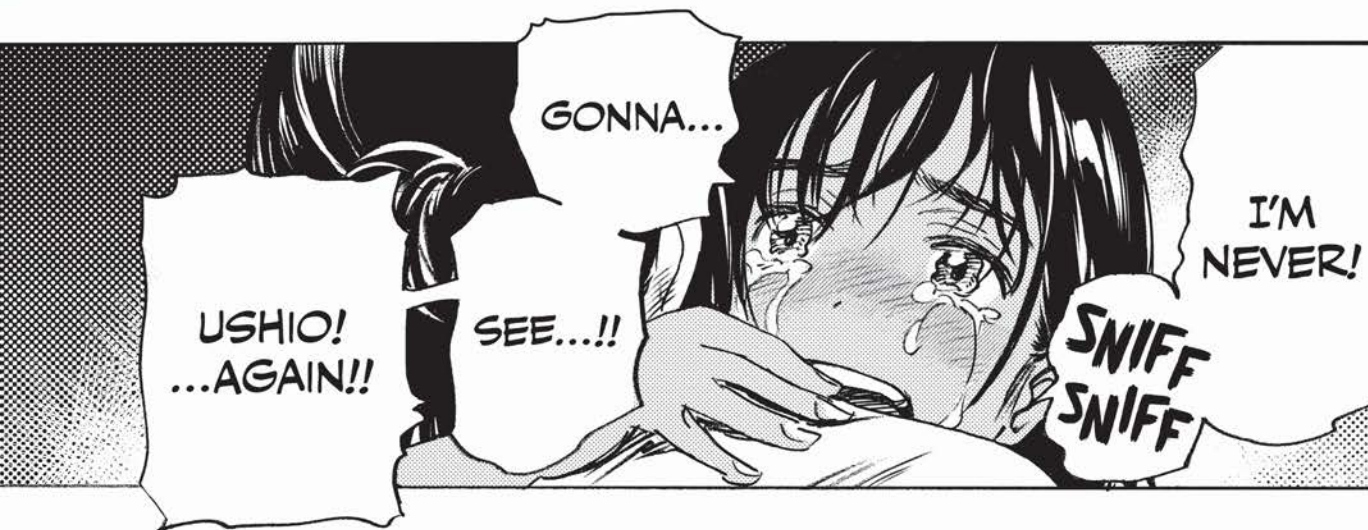
ME AND
MIO WERE
RIGHT BEHIND
HER. WE DIDN'T
SEE ANYONE
ELSE OUT
THERE...











to be continued in

SUMMERTIME RENDERING

by YASUKI TANAKA

An EPIC 6 VOLUME MANGA SERIES
from UDON ENTERTAINMENT



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Rules, Rules, Rules. The official rules are on page 95.

Viz Media

Pokemon The Series Sun & Moon Ultra Adventures (3 winners)

When Ash sees the Legendary Pokemon Solgaleo and Lunala in a dream, he makes a promise to them. But when he wakes up, he can't remember what it was! Will the strange Pokemon called Nebby help jog his memory? Along with their new friend and the rest of the students at the Pokemon School, Ash and Pikachu explore the Aether Foundation, an organization dedicated to Pokemon conservation and care. But it may not be as innocent as it seems, and Ash and his friends will have to work together to protect the people and Pokemon they care about as they face a mysterious power like nothing they have ever seen.



6-Disc Blu-ray Set, 48 Episodes, 16x9 Video, English Stereo 2.0 Audio, English SDH

JoJo's Bizarre Adventure, Set 4: Diamond is Unbreakable Arc Part I (2 winners)

It's 1999, and Jotaro Kujo has just arrived in the idyllic Japanese town of Morioh – only this time, he's not hunting DIO and his henchmen. His search for the illegitimate child of Joseph Joestar has brought him face-to-face with Josuke Higashikata, a Stand-wielding, butt-kicking high schooler who happens to be afraid of turtles. But behind Morioh's tranquil facade is an invisible evil slowly eating away at the peace and well-being of its residents. Bizarre happenings are becoming commonplace, and the Joestar clan must rise to the occasion if they and the town of Morioh are to survive. 3-Disc Blu-ray Set, Episodes 1-20, 1080p, 16:9 HD, English & Japanese Stereo Audio, English Subtitles.



SPECIAL FEATURES: 104-Page Booklet, English Cast Interviews, Art Gallery, Clean Opening and Ending, Trailers

Naruto Triple Feature Collector's Edition (2 winners)

A collector's dream! A new Blu-ray bundle of the classic Naruto movies in a deluxe cover featuring original artwork by American comic book legend, Whilce Portacio (Uncanny X-Men, Iron Man). First young Naruto and friends guard a princess in Ninja Clash in the Land of Snow. Then it's a battle over a dangerous relic in Legend of the Stone of Gelel. And finally, Rock Lee helps with a violent uprising in Guardians of the Crescent Moon Kingdom.



SPECIAL FEATURES: Animated Short: Hidden Leaf Village Grand Sports Festival, • Audio Commentary for: Legend of the Stone of Gelel, • Audio Commentary for: Guardians of the Crescent Moon Kingdom

Aksys Games

Variable Barricade—Nintendo Switch (3 winners)

Our heroine suddenly finds herself being "matched" for Marriage, courtesy of her eccentric, meddling grandfather. Determined to live her own life, can Hibari hold out against all the matchmaking schemes? Or will she find true love?



Are these guys for real? A loan shark, a gambler, a gold-digger and a gigolo. What could Hibari possibly have in common with any of them? Let alone want to marry any of them. Could there be more to them than meets the eye?

A reverse romance adventure with twists and turns to keep you guessing! Will Hibari reject all the suitors? Or will she fall in love?

Eye-catching anime artwork and j-pop soundtrack are great additions to this reality adventure.



Bandai Spirits Co., Ltd

Tamashi Nations - Ranking of Kings Bojji & Kage, Bandai Spirits S.H.Figuarts (1 winner)

Bojji & Kage, from the hit series "Ranking of Kings," joins S.H.Figuarts! Numerous accessories let you re-create your favorite scenes from the show!

SET CONTENTS: Main Body, Four optional expression parts, Four left and three right optional hands, Cape, Sword (with scabbard), Spear, Pole and Kage.

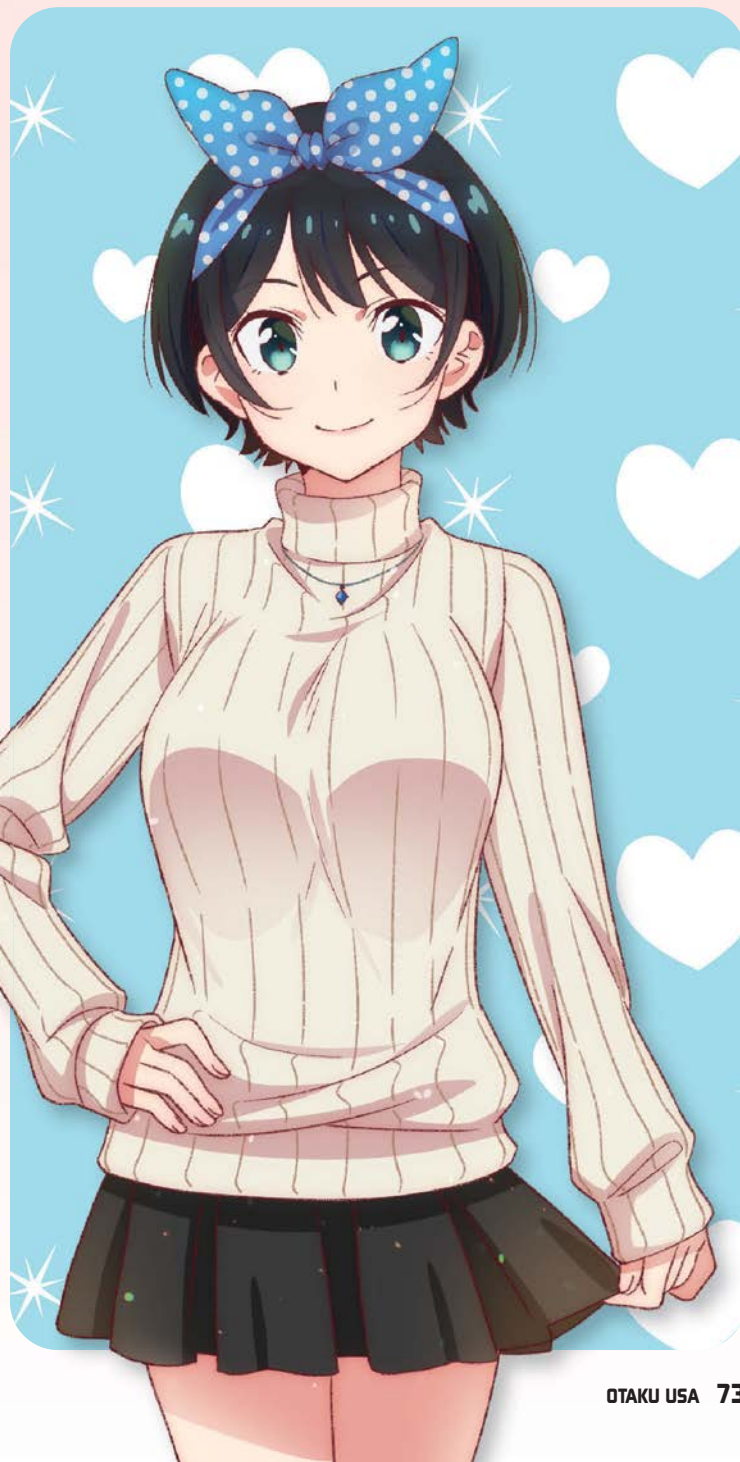
The LOVE

Welcome to *Rent-a-Girlfriend*, an anime where the feelings are real,



Connection

but the dates are not. | By Brittany Vincent



© Miyashima Reiji, Kodansha 'Rent-a-Girlfriend' Production Committee



Kazuya Kinoshita is down on his luck when it comes to romance. His very first girlfriend dumped him after a month-long relationship, which meant he had sunk into a deep depression, thinking he'd never be able to find love with another. But he didn't give up then, not even when his heart had shattered into a million pieces. He turned to an online dating app in a bid to "rent" a girlfriend instead. True, it's hardly the same as finding a real partner, but in Kazuya's case, he needed something to fill the void.

Enter Chizuru Mizuhara, Kazuya's date. Sweet, kind, and attractive, Kazuya is smitten with her, even as he forks over cash to benefit from her services. Kazuya's falling hard for his new rental girlfriend, and Chizuru is keeping it professional. Someone's undoubtedly going to catch feelings, however, and things are going to spiral out of control. Welcome to *Rent-a-Girlfriend*, where the feelings are real, but the dates are not. Where's Kazuya going to go from here? That's the fun part. Straight down the same road.

Rent to Own?

Kazuya and Chizuru get along quite well. So well, in fact, that during their first date, Kazuya thinks Chizuru is just being fake for the sake of the date. And while that's true to a point, as she has to remain professional and polite to her clients who

all rate her on the official dating app. But Kazuya decides to give her a negative review based on their interactions, coldly accusing her of being a "moron" who didn't know anything about the fish they saw together at the aquarium they visited.

Chizuru shows him her true colors when berating Kazuya for being so callous in response to her treating him like she would any other "renter." Something changes in Kazuya, and instead of resenting Chizuru for essentially just doing her job (which he's paying for, anyway!), he decides to continue utilizing her services.

It makes sense: Their personalities are quite complementary to each other. Kazuya is mouthy and forward about what he wants, though there's a side of him he has to hide away from his friends and family to keep up appearances. Chizuru is quite the same, especially as most of her friends and family know nothing about the fact that she's employed as a rental girlfriend for the Diamond company. This talk of dual natures is central to the plot, especially since there's one thread that brings Kazuya and Chizuru together over and over.

Keeping Up with the Kinoshitas

Just when Kazuya is about to decide he can't afford to keep renting Chizuru's services, especially as he's spending the money reserved for his college life, something that binds the pair

PLAYING WITH MY GIRLFRIEND

Can't get enough of *Rent-a-Girlfriend*? You can take it along with you on the go, with the official crossover smartphone game: *Kanojo, Okarishimasu Heroine All-Stars*. Though it isn't strictly based on *Rent-a-Girlfriend* per se, the Enish-developed game borrows from several anime and manga series to include some of the "best girls" throughout each one, including series like *Domestic Girlfriend*, *Fairy Tail*, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, *Girlfriend*, *Girlfriend*, *Fire Force*, *Boarding School Juliet*, *Yamada-kun and the Seven Witches*, and *Negima! Magister Negi Magi* in addition to, of course, *Rent-a-Girlfriend*.

Players can enjoy a variety of fun puzzles in this free-to-play game, as they collect 20 different heroines throughout their time within the app, with more to come. Take out your faves on weekly rental dates, and see if love truly blossoms like in the show. If nothing else, at least you get to take a look at some truly snazzy character art while playing. This particular release is chock-full of some gorgeous illustrations from the women of various rom-coms, dramas, fantasy series, and slice-of-life shows. You never know just what'll happen as you make your way throughout each puzzle.

© Miyashima Reiji, Kodansha/ 'Rent-a-Girlfriend' Production Committee



together occurs. Kazuya's grandmother is hospitalized after a collapse. He decides to take Chizuru along to visit her in the hospital, and—wouldn't you know it—his grandmother immediately takes a liking to Chizuru. Kazuya doesn't want to let his grandmother down and loves to

see the happiness on her face thinking her grandson has found someone he wants to be with for the foreseeable future. So, Chizuru agrees to let him continue renting her for dates, even after it's clear Kazuya is more than just a "problematic" client.

PDF NEWSPAPERS and MAGAZINES: WWW.XSAVA.XYZ



Kazuya's falling hard for his new rental girlfriend, and Chizuru is keeping it professional. Someone's undoubtedly going to catch feelings, however, and things are going to spiral out of control.

It's revealed that Chizuru is actually a lot closer to Kazuya than he originally imagined, too. While the pair work something out to help ensure Kazuya's grandmother is happy and content thinking her grandson has a girlfriend, we find out that Chizuru and Kazuya are actually next door neighbors at their apartment complex. How could they have never known? Chizuru takes great lengths not to share her true self with others. And while remaining Kazuya's rental girlfriend, she still manages to attend college and have something of a regular college life while remaining incognito.

Chizuru doesn't want to share her dalliances as a rental girlfriend with anyone, so she attends college under the name Chizuru Ichinose, named after her grandmother's family name. She piles on the nerdy accoutrements, like braided pigtails and dark frame glasses, just so no one has to know about her side job. All the while, she performs her job without having to answer to it at school or with her friends and family. This is something like Kazuya's insistence upon actually "dating" Chizuru when he speaks of how they met and their relationship to others—she's for all intents and purposes his girlfriend. But that can't last, of course.

Fake Dates to Real Feelings

Though initially, Kazuya decides he's going to take his frustration for not having a real girlfriend out on Chizuru, who's providing a service for guys like him, at some point real feelings begin to blossom. He doesn't want to admit it, though, and continues to pay for his dates with Chizuru despite watching his savings continue to dwindle. He takes a job at a karaoke bar to help pay for their time together, apparently having no intention of ceasing his dates with Chizuru in the near future.

But just as there are an abundance of upsides to having a "rental" girlfriend, there are many downsides, too, like jealousy, the expenses, the longing, the awkward conversations; the list goes on. People willingly pursuing relationships like these might actually be masochists!

But as he spends more time with her and sees how she lives life, what's important to her, and how she can be close and inviting to Kazuya, he realizes he's falling in love with her for real. And what do you do when you've been paying someone for so long to care for and then you actually begin doing so? In Kazuya's case, he has supportive friends who are there for him to help him do what he didn't realize he had grown to want since meeting Chizuru: to pursue her for real. And throughout *Rent-a-Girlfriend*, we see two very different but similar people come together to make a beautiful relationship, proving that you don't have to have a beautiful, perfect beginning to enjoy a satisfying, healthy end.

Rent-a-Girlfriend is available from Crunchyroll.



AIM FOR the TOP!

By Kara Dennison

Gunbuster
the Movie is
a great way
to experience
one of anime's
all-time sci-fi classics.



Classic Mecha *Gunbuster* made it to the Big Screen seven years before *Neon Genesis Evangelion* began its reality-smashing saga, and nearly three decades before *Gurren Lagann* played frisbee with galaxies. Gainax launched a massive mecha that dwarfed its Super Robot era forefathers. *Gunbuster* went hard with its mix of sports drama, giant robot action, and an entirely retooled scientific worldview that justified its explosive light-speed madness.

For years, though, you'd have been hard-pressed to actually get to see it. Localizations of the full OVA were only occasionally available, with DVDs going in and out of print. A Blu-ray is on the way ... but in the meantime, the abridged movie cut is within reach. It brings all the galaxy-resaping action and (almost) all the Inazuma Kicking of the OVA. But as we've learned from *Gun-*

buster itself, things look a little different when you're traveling at light speed.

AIMING FOR THE TOP

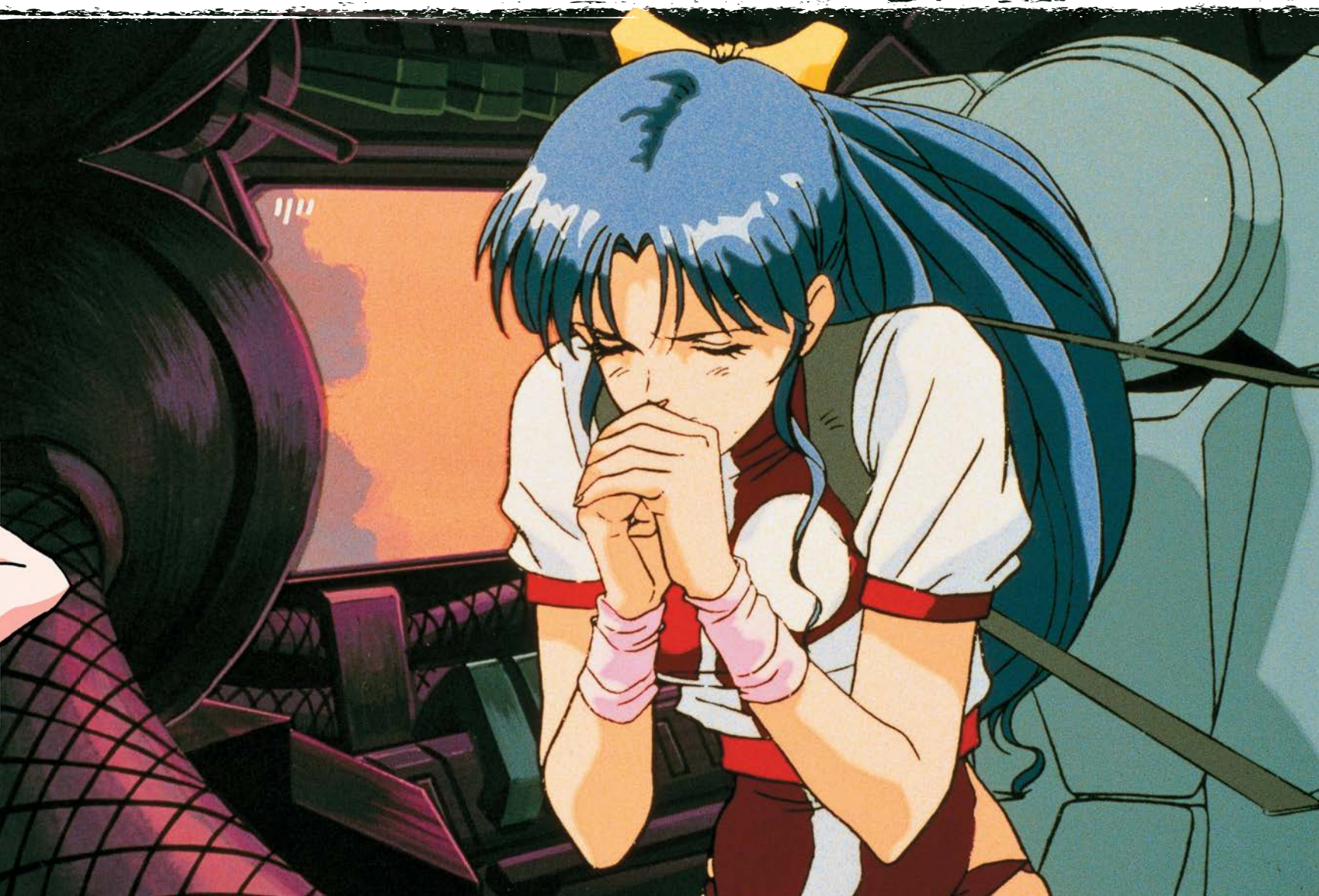
In 1987, the amateur studio calling themselves Daicon Film shot for the big time with their first feature film. Rebranded as Gainax, they presented the daring sci-fi feature *Royal Space*

Force: The Wings of Honnêamise: the story of a familiar but alternate world creating its own space program. The movie got mixed reviews from critics, with *Yomiuri Shimbun*'s review outright stating: "[I]f what you're seeking is *Top Gun* heroic fantasy, you're not going to get it."

No, that—quite literally that—would come the following year.



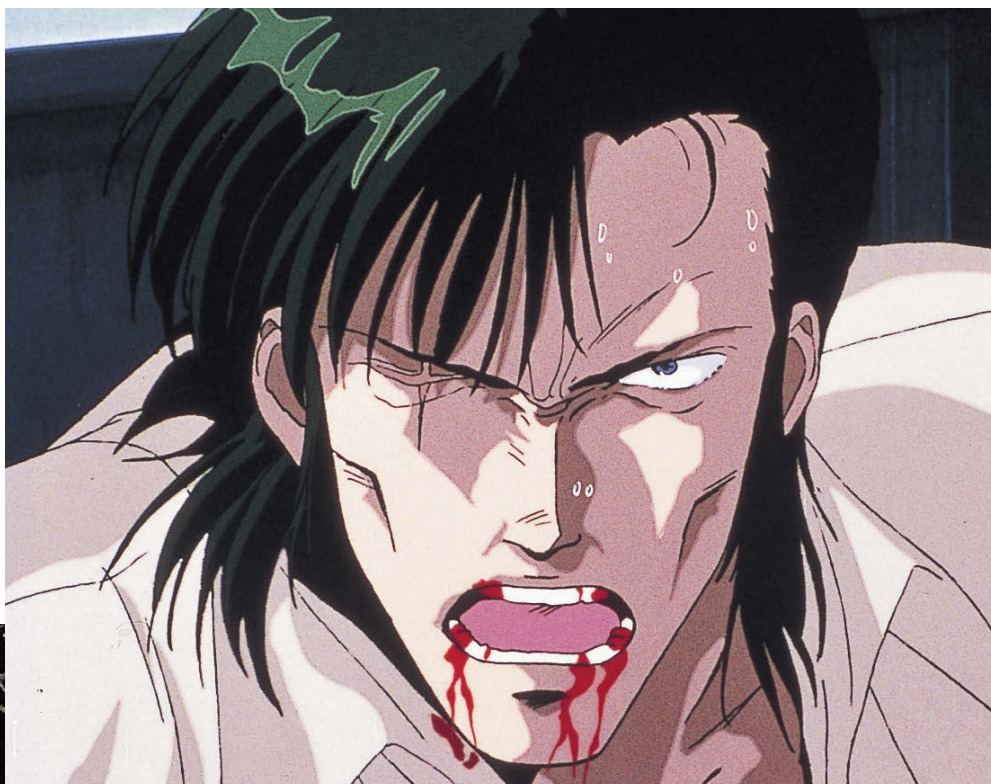
Seven years before *Evangelion*, *Gunbuster* went hard with its mix of sports drama, giant robot action, and an entirely retooled scientific worldview that justified its explosive lightspeed madness.

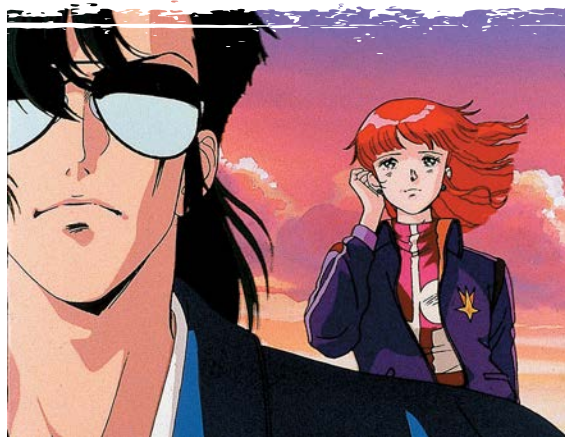


Gainax began releasing their six-part OVA *Aim for the Top! Gunbuster* in 1988. The mecha series took its name from its two primary inspirations: the aforementioned *Top Gun* and *Aim for the Ace!*—Sumika Yamamoto's classic *shoujo* tennis manga, adapted into an anime series by Osamu Dezaki in 1979.

Aim for the Ace! is where you'll find the majority of the plot structure for the beginning of *Gunbuster*. A clumsy but well-meaning girl who only enjoys athletics because she gets to be near the team's beautiful prodigy, is trained into a champion by the school's cold, damaged new coach. Eventually, the heroine and her beloved *senpai* team up to go the distance in their field—be it pairs tennis or protecting humanity from invading aliens.

The six episodes were released between 1988 and 1989 and were followed in 2006 by the OVA





TAKE THE CONTROLS

At the other end of the spectrum is the 2005 *Aim for the Top! Gunbuster* game for the PlayStation 2. Instead of editing the story down, it expands it into an interactive full-length anime series. You play as Noriko, and in the process can change how the story ends. Maybe you'll leave the world-saving to Kazumi. Maybe you'll team up with Jung Freud instead. There's even an ending where you can steal your oneesama's man and marry Coach yourself!



Sadly, her fortune doesn't seem to change at all. She's regularly benched, rejected by Kazumi as a partner in favor of a character we barely know, and loses her new partner in battle. She doesn't get a single win. But when she buckles down, she finally shows the promise Coach saw in her. Especially when she launches off solo in *Gunbuster*, a super-powered mecha loaded down with missiles, lasers, and energy beams. You'll get to see them all in play, and more, when Noriko and Kazumi pilot it together as intended.

THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR

If you're new to *Gunbuster*, this probably sounds awesome. And it is. But if you're a long-standing fan, you'll notice a lot of things missing—and those things change the story quite a bit. In effect, everything up to Noriko's first outing in *Gunbuster* is condensed down to half an

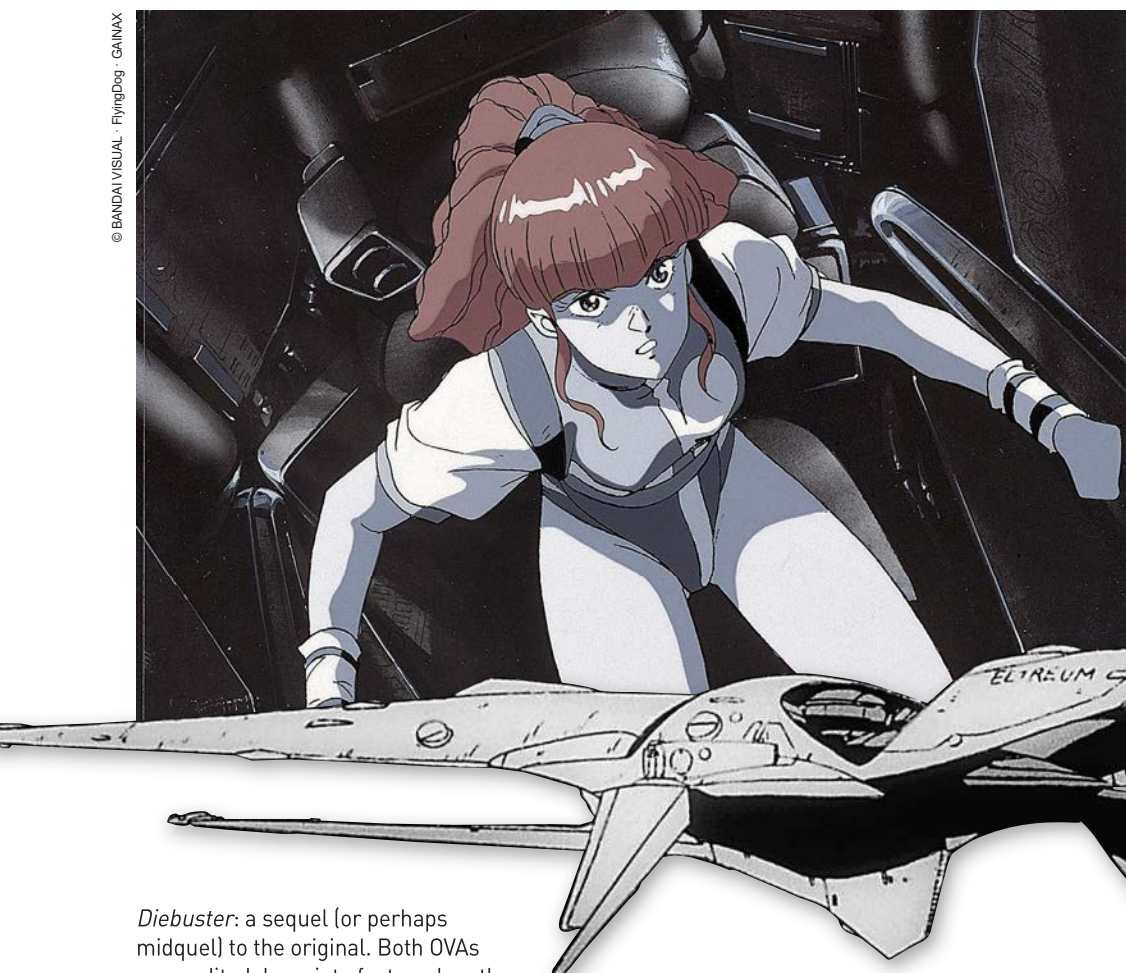
Diebuster: a sequel (or perhaps midquel) to the original. Both OVAs were edited down into feature-length films for a cinematic double-feature that same year, with *Gunbuster* getting upgraded sound effects and re-recorded dialogue.

DAUGHTER OF DEFEAT

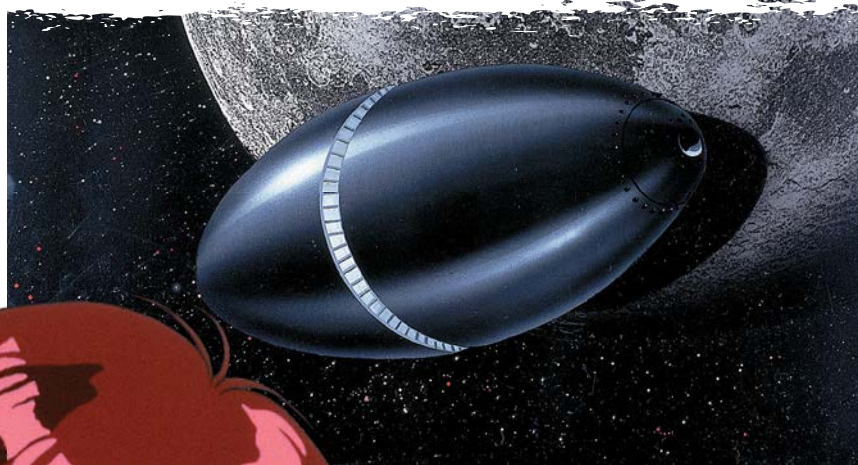
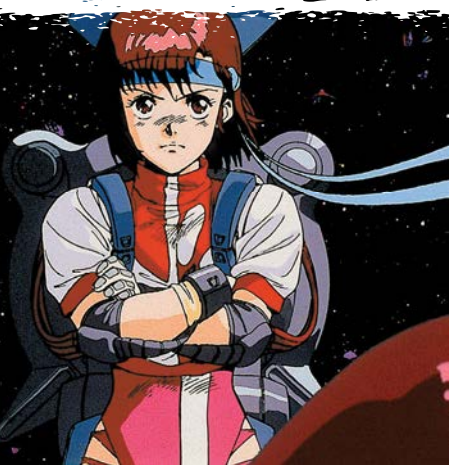
The *Gunbuster* movie is a fairly straight shot in terms of plot: a zero-to-hero story for Noriko Takaya. Her nickname in school, the "Daughter of Defeat," comes from her clumsiness and all-around badness at being a trainee mecha pilot. But it stings just that little bit more when you consider her father, Admiral Yuzo Takaya,

notably died in battle six years prior. Her only real interest in robot piloting is the fact that she can be near her beautiful and talented "oneesama," Kazumi Amano.

Kazumi is the standout in their school, especially when Coach Ohta arrives. She's the only one to survive his rigorous training, as Noriko literally can't even run a single lap in her robot. Somehow, she's chosen to accompany Kazumi and Coach on a mission of galactic importance. Even she isn't sure why—but after being informed that hard work will change her fortune, they're off.



© BANDAI VISUAL - FlyingDog - GAINAX



hour total, allowing the massive fights at the end of the series to play out in full.

In the OVA, Noriko is still fairly unskilled when their mission begins. But she's gotten a win against school bully Reiko Kashiwara, who barely gets a mention in the movie cut. Coach observes Noriko *already* showing potential when she realizes she can focus better when she *just shuts off her monitors*. She also lands her first Inazuma Kick: a move that will become her signature later.

Kazumi's alternate partner is hardly a background character, either. We spend a lot of time with Jung Freud, the Soviet pilot who becomes a friendly rival as soon as the pair board the *Exelion*. And speaking of partners, there are two romances—both seen in the film, but both given more time to burn in the OVA.

Returning fans can fill in the blanks, knowing who Jung is and knowing that Noriko kicked some robot butt offscreen. But without these scenes and without context for them, you can kind of see why Noriko's classmates immediately assumed nepotism was in play. The Noriko of this edit really is weak and unfortunate, with nothing to show for her efforts before the title robot arrives.

It's great to get to the fights faster, and to focus up on that beautiful animation ... but we also do miss seeing our girl at her best.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

The good news is the movie affords us a way to experience *Gunbuster* in some form. The OVA has been notoriously spotty in terms of English-language availability. A beautiful DVD box set from Bandai USA's Honneamise line *did* exist but has been out of print for quite some time.

Discotek will be bringing us a Blu-ray, complete with an English-language dub for the first time. But that's still a little bit of a ways away. If you miss the action, the animation, and that beautiful music, the movie is right here waiting for you.

Compared to the film edit of *Diebuster*, the *Gunbuster* movie tells a far broader story: one of ordinary people becoming heroes, eventually elevated to legends, and coming home to a world that regards them as something like gods. On its own, the film still lets us re-experience moments we love, even if a few of those moments have been left behind for the time being.

Gunbuster the Movie is available from Section23.

A Sense of wonder!

Penguin Highway is an unpredictable arctic beast of an anime!

By
Michael
Goldstein

When I was asked to write about a movie and that movie happened to be called *Penguin Highway*, my mind immediately latched on to two things: first, that this movie will most likely prominently feature penguins. And second, and more importantly, that the title actually comes from the award-winning novel of the same name by Tomihiko Morimi, who has had his work adapted in the past, specifically *The Eccentric Family* and *Night Is Short, Walk On Girl*. Not only that, but this is also Studio Colorido's (*Burn the Witch*) first feature film, and based on the strengths of this effort, they're certainly a name to be watched in the future.

The first thing I noticed about the film was the presence, or rather lack of, the titular penguins. As the film slowly goes on, it becomes evident that the film isn't actually about them. They're there for a good amount—especially in the extended opening sequence, which is lovingly animated Hiroshi Shimizu of Studio Ghibli fame—up until halfway through, where they vanish entirely until the end. They're technically still there, but they don't appear in any background shots. It's pretty understandable why the film would disappoint those who anticipated that the penguins would be more prominent.

To be fair, the plot of the film isn't even about the penguins in the first place; they could've been replaced with any other creature and the plot wouldn't have changed a bit. There isn't even any urgency as to figuring how the heck the penguins got in the suburbs in the first place. So, what is the plot about? Instead of penguins, we have the fourth-grader Aoyama, a rather intellectual boy driven by the scientific method. He is currently counting down the days until he becomes an adult. He's also got something of a haughty attitude that makes him a perfect target for school bullies. He finds his interest piqued by the sudden appearances of the penguins and starts to investigate them and connect their arrival to a series of bizarre events. Where did these penguins come from? What do these penguins have to do with everything else happening in the neighborhood? Oh, and he's also fascinated with a young dental assistant whom he frequently calls "The Lady," and wants to marry her ... once he becomes an adult, of course.

As children, we wanted to be larger than life. Some of us wanted to be astronauts. Others wanted to be people like firefighters and doctors and save lives. Others wanted to build something crazy and win a Nobel Peace Prize. But somewhere along the road, we "grew out," and that sense of wonder slowly dissipated. We started to get ready for reality and eventually hardened ourselves to prepare for the worst. Aoyama seems to have this logic settled in his mind.

At its heart, *Penguin Highway* is a coming-of-age tale, anyone who has ever seen Morimi's other anime adaptations will already be familiar with the quirky and melancholic tone; for others, however, the atmosphere and pacing may seem unfamiliar. You can see it in the characterization, from the sharp-tongued Lady and the somewhat conceited Aoyama. Without going into too much detail, the relationship between Aoyama and the Lady is a driving force with a lot of great banter, not to mention many of the snippets of philosophy about growing up spouted by the side characters. The cast is ultimately as colorful as the animation itself.







Colorido has made this film a brightly colorful experience. Minimalistic but clean backgrounds aid a palette of bright colors. The character designs are charmingly simple but ultimately pull their weight through various and vibrant body language. Whether it be simple character interactions or emphasizing the more surreal moments involving the penguins, every moment in this film feels like a joy to watch; no single shot in this film goes to waste.

There's an overlap in terms of quirky humor, realistic character designs, and absurd fantasy/sci-fi elements in many Moromi-based adaptations. But in some adaptations—primarily those of *The Tatami Galaxy* and *Night is Short* directed by Hiroyasu Ishida—the wacky and the surreal are the more dominant force, even when dealing with more mundane parts of the story.

The art style is graphic and cartoony with a direction that moves at a lightning-fast pace, which is especially troubling for subtitle readers who might have trouble catching up.

Penguin Highway, which is the feature debut of Hiroyasu Ishida, couldn't be any more different to the same sort of material. There is an emphasis on the "realism" in "magic realism"—although the "magic" aspect is pretty prominent too—



thanks to a combination of a slower pace and more naturalistic character animation. Some might say the pace is a little *too* slow—you could probably shave 10 to 20 minutes off of its two-hour runtime and might be rewarded with something much more enriching. Despite that, the film rewards you for your patience with some truly special moments, and the sharp characterization makes the quieter scenes far more pronounced.

In the end, *Penguin Highway* is an unpredictable beast of a movie, and the penguins are only the tip of the WTH-berg. There are a lot of bizarrely wonderful elements in this film, yet for all of that external weirdness, the drive of the story is all internal. It's not the most thrilling narrative, and it could benefit from a much stronger narrative drive, not to mention that the penguins have less of a presence than anticipated, but what there already is thought out well and done in a relatable approach. Seeing everything all come together will help you understand the freedom and magic that animation can bring. It's a wonderful effort for Colorido's first feature-length film.

Penguin Highway is available from Netflix.

Penguin Highway is a brightly colorful experience. Minimalistic but clean backgrounds aid a palette of bright colors. The character designs are charmingly simple but ultimately pull their weight through various and vibrant body language.

The Other Adaptations of Morimi's Works.

If you're a fan of *Penguin Highway*, then you're bound to fall in love with other adaptations of Morimi's works. *The Tatami Galaxy* and *Night is Short, Walk On Girl* were both adapted by anime director Masaaki Yuasa, and both stories share the same setting and even some of the same characters, but both anime have different themes from their respective novels. In *The Tatami Galaxy* (the book), the theme can best be described as "it's funny how life works out" and the connectedness of all people, but the anime's theme is more about how you can change your fate once you figure out what it is you really want to do; it ends up capturing the uncertainty and confusion of young adult life. In *Night is Short* (film), what was once a year's worth of events in the novel is now crammed into a single evening in the adaptation. In practice, it should be a mess, but it manages to be coherent because of the novel's simplicity: a girl goes out and meets new people, each of which manages to leave a deeper impression on her than she realized.

The Eccentric Family, meanwhile, successfully captures both the mood and tempo of the original novel. Despite the story being about a family of shape-shifting tanuki, the adventures of which go unnoticed by humans, their emotions are shockingly grounded in reality, with such things as family drama being given appropriate weight. All of its more cartoony moments are rendered with the right amount of exaggeration, as befitting a group of magical creatures. But the best parts lay in the background art, which capture the image of a fantasy depiction of Kyoto quite effectively.



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FOOD FIGHT!

By
Kara
Dennison

For nearly two decades, *Pretty Cure* has been a staple of anime. *Delicious Party Pretty Cure* shows how the magic continues.

IN 2004, Toei launched a new franchise that would give rise to 17 generations of magical girls, 19 seasons of high-octane battles, and more light-up *henshin* toys than you can shake a stick at. It also gained a global fan following that wanted nothing more than to be able to watch their favorite fighters on the streaming platform of their choice. In 2020, after a couple of false starts, *Pretty Cure* made its way to the world of simulcasts.

This season, a new team of heroines is on the job—and this time, they've brought snacks.

Delicious Party Pretty Cure is all about food, from its waitress-themed costumes to its collectible fairies based on popular dishes. But the theme goes beyond the show's overall aesthetic. It's not just about food, but what it means to us.

The Pedigree

In its first season, *Pretty Cure* (fully titled *We Are Pretty Cure*) was led by the sporty Nagisa and the brainy Honoka, a.k.a. Cure Black and Cure White. The unlikely duo could only transform when they were together—giving the show lots of opportunities to talk about maintaining friendships and trust.

As the franchise went on, the team sizes started to vary from season to season, becoming more akin to Super Sentai team structures. Like red rangers, pink Cures serve as team leaders

(albeit sometimes more emotionally than functionally). Each generation has a color-coded team, with villains, humanized mascots, and others occasionally stepping into the Mysterious Sixth Ranger role. And, of course, there are transformation items and weapons to buy.


Magical girl anime is no stranger to Super Sentai influence, of course; *Sailor Moon* did similar a decade prior. The two formats go well together, and *Pretty Cure*'s longevity continues to prove that. It's why we're creeping up on two decades of the show, with series themes ranging from dancing to fashion to living your best princess life. And as time goes on, those themes have become more and more embedded in their respective series—teaching solid lessons about kindness and friendship to their target demographic. And the rest of us, too, of course.

The Magic of Cooking

Delicious Party Pretty Cure unites two worlds: the alternate dimension of CookKingdom, and the equally food-centric but more down-to-earth Oishiina Town. The latter is a town filled with restaurants serving dishes from all over the world, and it just so happens that our three heroines—Yui, Kokone, and Ran—come from the families that own three of the town's most popular restaurants.

Though one setting runs on literal magic and the other is far more like our own, they have one





**DELICIOUS PARTY
PRETTY CURE IS
ALL ABOUT FOOD.
FROM ITS WAITRESS-
THEMED COSTUMES
TO ITS COLLECTIBLE
FAIRIES BASED ON
POPULAR DISHES.
BUT THE THEME GOES
BEYOND THE SHOW'S
OVERALL AESTHETIC.
IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT
FOOD. BUT WHAT IT
MEANS TO US.**

SAVE ROOM FOR DESSERT

Delicious Party Pretty Cure isn't the first season to have a culinary theme. 2017's *Kira Kira Pretty Cure a la Mode* goes straight for the sweets, with a season taking place in a patisserie. Though it aired before Crunchyroll began streaming the franchise, they grabbed it after the fact for several territories around the world.

big thing in common: they believe in the importance of making and sharing delicious food. Unfortunately, hungry phantom thieves have stolen away CookKingdom's magic recipe book, and their quest to find Energy Fairies to complete the book's recipes is making the food in Oishiina Town taste terrible. Fortunately, Rosemary—CookKingdom's beauty-conscious scout in our world—has found himself some help in the person of Yui.

Yui, later accompanied by Kokone and Ran, make up the food-themed team. As always, the Cures have their own respective themes within the team. And these are ... rice, sandwiches, and ramen. As tempting as it is to simply acknowledge that 19 years is a long time to have to come up with magical girl themes, this does honestly work out really well.

Sharing Is Caring

Over the years, *Pretty Cure* has gotten better and better at integrating its aesthetic theme into its story theme. Yes, one of the mascots is a puppy that turns into a sandwich. And yes, at one point Cure Precious and Cure Spicy combine their attacks to panini-press the monster of the week. But there really is more going on here.

Any self-respecting Pink Cure has two catchphrases: one that's cute and silly, and one that's motivational. Yui's descriptor for tasty food is "Deliciousmile," and that's not far off from her actual motto, courtesy of her grandmother: "Food brings smiles." She's a big believer in connecting with people through food—more specifically, cooking and sharing food.

Each of the girls "shares" in their own way. Yui loves to cook, the shy and wealthy Kokone is learning to accept the generosity of others, and Ran loves to Instagram her lunch. They're all enthusiastic about food in terms of what it symbolizes: love, friendship, looking after people, and just generally appreciating all the different creative ways people make tasty things.

It's a straightforward lesson for the kids in the audience. Sure, themes of cooking and food mean Toei can sell light-up juice glasses. But it's also a very universal symbol: one that anyone of any age, watching on any streaming site in any country, can take to heart.

Going Forward

The longer *Pretty Cure* runs, the more it experiments with its structure. This season sees more male characters in a series where they're often



ENTER THE CURE-VERSE

Pretty Cure is always about branding, but with recent seasons, we're seeing the world of the show and our own world link up a bit more. Ran's social media site of choice is the fictional CureSta: a nod to the name of the show's official Instagram account. There's also an in-universe beauty parlor, *Pretty Holic*, which was first introduced in last year's *Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure* and carries over to *Delicious Party Pretty Cure*. *Pretty Holic* just happens to be the name of the series' real-world beauty line, carrying kid-safe cosmetics themed to the show's different teams.



relegated to either villains or background characters. Rosemary, *CookKingdom*'s beauty guru and Yui's mentor, may be slightly out of commission and unable to fight as well as he usually would. But he's out there in the field each episode, working as a one-man Dividing Driver to clear a battlefield for the monster of the week. We also meet Yui's childhood friend Takumi—who's got secrets of his own.

This is also the first season with a narrator. Each week, we get to hear the voice of screen and film actress Yoshiko Miyazaki as an interested, but as yet unidentified, observer.

At this point in *Pretty Cure*'s run, Toei could simply animate magical girl fights, sell toys, and get on with things. But with *Delicious Party Pretty Cure*, as with other recent seasons, time is taken to really drive home a message that extends beyond the screen. It may be a basic, simple message—but that's really all it takes. These recent seasons are finding new ways to demonstrate how little things in life are signs of love and friendship. No transformation item needed ... unless you want one, of course.

Delicious Party Pretty Cure is available from Crunchyroll.

Great Nezura Strikes

Giant rats, angry statues, and a big buddha

Nezura 1964

In *tokusatsu* (Japanese special effects) film lore, one of the most infamous stories is that of the aborted monster film *Nezura*. It had been intended for release in early 1964. In late 1963, inspired by the success of Toho's *King Kong vs.*

75 Meters (1963). With stop motion out of his range in terms of budget and schedule, Tsukiji and his team turned to using live rats filmed at high-speed crawling over miniatures. When lab rats proved too docile, the effects team captured live Tokyo sewer rats. This natu-

to retry making a monster film, however, from which *Gamera* (1965) was born.

Independent maverick Hiroto Yokokawa (*The Great Buddha Arrival*) depicts a darkly comedic, fictionalized portrait of these events in late 1963. A crowdfunded



STUDIO/COMPANY
SRS Video
RELEASE DATE
2020
RUNNING TIME
55 Minutes



Godzilla and Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Daiei's movie mogul Masaichi Nagata greenlit a *Food of the Gods*-style tale of giant rats enlarged through a chemical food-stuff. *Nezura* was to be directed by Mitsuo Murayama (*Invisible Man vs. the Human Fly*) with its special-effects unit helmed by Yonesaburo Tsukiji. Tsukiji, a protege of Eiji Tsuburaya, had staged successful miniaturized flood sequences in *Nichiren and the Great Mongol Invasion* (1958) and *Wind Velocity*

rally proved an utter logistical and hygiene nightmare, with a crew member almost dying of sickness from a rat-borne tick bite. Eventually, it began to cause local vermin outbreaks as many rats escaped and bred. The Tokyo Board of Health thus ordered production shut down. The rats were exterminated through immolation and the movie was scrapped. All footage of the film was later destroyed in 2002 when Kadokawa acquired Daiei's assets. Nagata was eager

tokusatsu indie film somewhat fittingly made during the COVID pandemic, *Nezura 1964* shows off its low budget in moments but overall is a very on-key homage to another piece of lost kaiju cinema. Its main flaw is having too low of a budget to feel that authentically like 1960s Showa Japan. *Nezura 1964*'s major strength, however, is the film's loving recreations of the original movie's production photos and early footage. Most impressive are black-and-white high frame rate

shots of rats crawling all over miniatures—looking much as they likely did in 1963. Many of *The Great Buddha Arrival*'s core cast members return including Kazuma Yoneyama and Masanori Kikuzawa who play stand-ins for Noriaki Yuasa and Yonesaburo Tsukiji, respectively. As with the former film, director Hiroto Yokokawa fills the movie with cameos of tokusatsu film veterans. The *Heisei Gamera* trilogy's Yukijiro Hotaru plays a stand-in for Daiei's sleazy



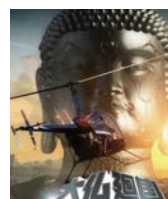
CEO: Masaichi Nagata. Mach Fumiaki (*Gamera: Supermonster*) plays an angry union chair. Yoshiro Uchida (the child star of the original 1965 *Gamera*) plays a fictionalized version of suit-builder Ryosaku Takayama, later best known for creating numerous Ultraman monster suits. Shiro Sano (*Godzilla 2000*) and Bin Furuya (*Ultraman*) also play expies of Hajime and Eiji Tsuburaya, respectively.

Most visually impressive are sequences with a suitmation "Mammoth Nezura" played by actor Akira Ohashi who previously portrayed monsters like *Gamera 3's* Iris and *GMK's* King Ghidorah. Ultimately, *Nezura 1964* is an amusing movie about the logistical challenges of filmmaking and an on-key tribute to old school cinema. This message rings true in today's post-COVID world where filmmaking presents its own set of challenges and risks. Tokusatsu filmmaking in particular, however, has proved oddly COVID-proof as monster suits, puppets and miniaturized models can be shot while maintaining social distancing protocol. Yokokawa's next stop is the just-wrapped *Ghost Cat Rhapsody* (2022). With *Howl from Beyond the Fog's* Daisuke Sato as cinematographer, the film is a tribute to old school J-Horror and Daiei's yokai movies.

—J.L. Carrozza

The Great Buddha Arrival

One of Japanese Nichiren Buddhism's most fundamental tenets



STUDIO/COMPANY
SRS Video
(Amazon Prime Video)

RELEASE DATE
2018

RUNNING TIME
60 minutes

is an acceptance of the transience of existence. That everything, both good and bad, is impermanent. In Nichiren Buddhism, this understanding helps its worshippers cope with challenging times while

savoring and appreciating peaceful periods. This is a fitting mindset for a culture that lost 99% of its film history to the 1923 Great Kanto quake and wartime Allied firebombings. One of these lost movies was Japan's very first kaiju or giant monster picture: *The Great Buddha Arrival*, released in 1934 and

ing a brawl at a teahouse and asked if he wanted work as a cameraman. Edamasa strived to create Japanese films that rivaled Hollywood's output. While he could never quite reach this goal, his protegee would go on to create world famous Japanese special effects and monster films.

In Japan, Edamasa's film *The Great Buddha Arrival* has taken on a legendary status akin to *King Kong's* spider pit sequence in Western monster fandom. Barring the sudden discovery of a copy, which is not unheard of (see: Tsuburaya's pivotal 1935 *Princess Kaguya*), *The Great Buddha Arrival* is something



life where the Great Buddha saved him from committing suicide. As Murata delves deeper, the Great Buddha at Shurakuen Park in Aichi

comes to life and begins to walk across Tokyo. Is Great Buddha's mysterious arrival a sign of impending disaster or hope?

Compared to an "Asylum movie directed by David Lynch" on Letterboxd, *The Great Buddha Arrival*, particularly its ending, does indeed feel like one of Lynch's transcendental meditation sessions. Early moments act as something of a documentary on this lost film and feel a bit superfluous. Weaker moments of *The Great Buddha Arrival*, like an Asylum picture, do feel raw and show off their low budget. However, director Hiroto Yokokawa displays a genuine talent as an independent filmmaker and other images and segments have a lyrical genius. *The Great Buddha Arrival* particularly begins to show promise with a lengthy black-and-white flashback sequence dealing with Edamasa (Masanori Kikuzawa). It feels much like a recreation of the original film's aesthetic with *A Page of Madness*-like phantasmagoria. Once Great Buddha begins his long trudge through the Kanto region, the film becomes highly entertaining. The visual effects, particularly for a film of this low budget, are surprisingly



directed by Yoshiro Edamasa. Edamasa was none other than the first cinematic mentor of Japan's greatest Showa-era special effects director and the father of *Godzilla* and *Ultraman*: Eiji Tsuburaya. It was Edamasa who, in 1919, approached a young Tsuburaya dur-

that none of us will ever get to experience. With that in mind, Millennial independent filmmaker and tokusatsu fan Hiroto Yokokawa, for his first feature film, creates a work that functions as an all-in-one documentary, tribute, and remake of this mysterious film. While having



polished with impressive digital composites of the great Buddha juxtaposed against genuine background plates of Tokyo.

Like many of us, director Yokokawa is obsessed with his childhood heroes and quite a few veteran kaiju and tokusatsu cinema stars were recruited for *The Great Buddha Arrival*. These include Akira Takarada (*Godzilla '54*), Yoshiro Uchida (*Gamera*), Akira Kubo (*Matango*), Yukiko Kobayashi (*Destroy All Monsters*) and Bin Furuya (*Ultraman*). Some additional cameos were added for longer cuts Yokokawa made for international audiences. Yukijiro Hotaru, best known for the role of Inspector Osako in the *Heisei* Gamera trilogy, essentially reprises the role as well. Even lesser-known gaijin players such as Shelley Sweeney (*Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla II*), Robert Scott Field (*Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah*) and Inge Murata (*Shin Godzilla*) appear.

The actor cameo that makes the biggest impression, however, is that of Peggy Neal, best known for playing, as our editor-in-chief would say, “the spaced-out white chick in *X From Outer Space*.” She gives a hauntingly beautiful, pantheistic explanation for the film’s supernatural events. Sadly, after being only recently rediscovered, Neal passed away in 2021. There is a strong feeling of Nichiren Buddhist transience running throughout *The Great Buddha Arrival* that is particularly apparent in its surreal and bleak ending. It feels timely in that it closely predated the recent misfortunes of COVID-19. Overall, *The Great Buddha Arrival* is a quality piece of contemporary Japanese cinema and strong debut from director Yokokawa—another figure in the modern tokusatsu film scene whose career bears watching.

—J.L. Carrozza

Majin Strikes Again

Daiei’s Kyoto branch would produce one final Majin film in 1966, *Majin Strikes Again*, released in



STUDIO/COMPANY
Arrow Video
RELEASE DATE
1966
RUNNING TIME
87 Minutes

December. For this entry, influence was likely drawn from Daiei Tokyo’s Gamera cycle as a more child-oriented approach was taken and a quartet of boy protagonists figure heavily into the plot.

Arakawa (Toru Abe), yet another evil warlord, has enslaved the men of a village to make gunpowder for a planned overthrow of their liege lord. A quartet of their sons (Hideki Ninomiya, Masahide Iizuka, Shinji Hori and Muneyuki Nagatomo) go to Hell’s Valley, the location of Arakawa’s sulfur pit, to save them. Naturally, the guardian of the mountain, Majin, soon grows angered by this injustice and

gives the kids a hand.

The most ambitious but uneven of the films, *Majin Strikes Again* often feels like an old-school live action Disney movie. The direction of the child actors is better than Noriaki Yuasa’s on the *Showa* Gamera films. Behind the scenes, director Kazuo Mori (*The Tale of Zatoichi Continues*), who had no children of his own, was grouchy and stern to them. In all three

films, the music of Akira Ifukube evokes the polish of a Toho production. *Majin Strikes Again*, playing to kids’ shorter attention spans, opens with an effects scene from Yoshiyuki Kuroda’s unit. This impressive opening features a well-staged flood and astonishing miniature work. The opening sequence of *Majin Strikes Again* makes use of Daiei Kyoto’s giant effects pool, built for *Nichiren* and



the Great Mongol Invasion. According to DP Fujio Morita, the shot of parched soil splitting was created by placing dirt and sand atop plastic tenting. This was then dried and pulled to create the effect. An early shot of Majin materializing was created through a process called negative rubbing.

The bulk of shooting took place in August and September of 1966. Per the more rushed schedule, Fujio Morita would share cinematographer duties with colleague Hiroshi Imai, the latter focusing on director Mori’s unit. Their cinematography is lush with moments of visual beauty. The location scenes tended to be shot first and the on-set and effects shots were done afterward, adjusted to the location’s weather for continuity. This was a big challenge for Morita. Another problem that put pressure on an already behind schedule production is that the negatives for a good portion of the footage were scratched during processing. This rendered a swath of both units’ footage unusable, and the crew had to do reshoots in



rural Tateyama.

FX director Yoshiyuki Kuroda's unit supplies another impressive divine rampage for the finale, extended in runtime. Kuroda repeats visual motifs from the first two films and the sequence lacks a little novelty. Per DP Morita's love of atmospheric air particles, the sequence is aided by snowfall fluttering through the air. Styrofoam was used as snow and freon gas was released onto the set to make it behave like snowflakes. The sequence is, however, on par with Eiji Tsuburaya's subsequent work and contains stunning segments such as Majin wading through a torrent of cannon fire. Cement was often mixed into the explosives to give them more volume. Another stunningly executed bit in the final moments features Majin turning to snow as the sky clears. This effect was engineered by Keizo Murase. Kuroda was impressed with it and his crew nailed it in one take. Majin Strikes Again is the weakest of the three pictures but technically polished and entertaining in a way the subsequent Gamera films made at Daiei Tokyo seldom were. *Majin Strikes Again* makes one wish that Yoshiyuki Kuroda had been brought in to handle the FX work there, sadly impossible due to corporate politics within Daiei.

—J.L. Carrozza is the author of SF: *The Japanese Science Fiction Film Encyclopedia* and the upcoming *Japanese Special Effects Cinema: Godfathers of Tokusatsu*.

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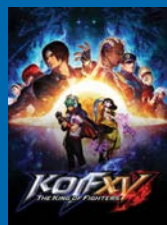
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The King of Fighters XV

Mark of the wolves!



PUBLISHER
SNK

DEVELOPER
SNK

SYSTEM(S)
PS4, PS5, Xbox One,
Xbox Series, PC

RATING
T

The King of Fighters is one of the OG fighting series. It received a yearly release for the first 16 years of its existence but has largely fallen by the wayside as games from Arc System Works and Capcom take center stage. However, this venerable franchise is getting a fresh crack at life with *The King of Fighters XV*.

King of Fighters XV continues the series tradition of two teams of three facing off against each other. In lieu of rounds, you fight until all three characters' health is depleted. This gameplay style will be familiar to anyone who's played *Marvel vs. Capcom* or *Dragon Ball FighterZ*. However, unlike those games, *King of Fighters* doesn't allow tagging out. So, you have to be strategic about your character picks. For example, do you put your strongest pick first or your weakest?

Of all fighting games currently on the market, *The King of Fighters* is one of the most complex. You'll have to learn about Special Moves, Super Special Moves, reversals, counters, blowback attacks, MAX Mode, power meters, and more. Fortunately, the tutorial is fairly robust and does a good job of explaining the nuances of movement and combat.

Each of the 39 characters that come with the base game has a unique playstyle that distinguishes them from each other. Some of them, like *Fatal Fury*'s Terry Bogard, are easy to pick up and play with. Others, like the wrestling-focused Shermie, are a bit harder to grasp. This is further compounded by the game's emphasis on reversals, counters, and cancels. As a result, to master a character, you really



have to put some time into learning everything about their moveset.

The story in *The King of Fighters XV* isn't bad, but it's not too unique either. Verse has been defeated, but a new character named Shun'ei appears with similar powers. You must pick one of the 13 teams of 3 characters and take on a series of



iconic visual style didn't make the transition to 3D well. Fortunately, the graphics and effects have improved with the move to Unreal Engine 4. Of course, it doesn't have the same charm that the hand-drawn sprites from *The King of Fighters XIII* and earlier titles do, but it's a lot closer to capturing that magic than it was.

One of the best features *The King of Fighters XV* brings is the DJ Station. It allows you to customize all the backing tracks in the game. So, you can select from hundreds of SNK tracks from previous *KOF* titles and other games and set the music for specific stages or the character select screen. Since you spend so much time browsing through the same menu over and over in fighting games, it's a godsend to have the ability to change the music. Those who spent dozens of hours hearing "I wanna take you for a ride" in *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* like me will understand.

The King of Fighters XV is a quality title with complex fighting that rewards those who put in the time to learn its systems. The production quality in this title is better than its predecessor, and it shows SNK can still work its magic.

—Brittany Vincent

fights with them. It's a pretty standard format, but I would have liked to have seen more done with it. As it stands, there's little difference between this campaign and the ones from *The King of Fighters* games from 20 years ago.

One of the criticisms the previous *KOF* received was that the series'

Pokémon Legends: Arceus

Gotta survey 'em all!

After 25 successful years, it was about time that Pokémon got an overhaul that completely changed the series' blueprint players have grown accustomed to over the years. And goodness; did its latest installment get a revamp! Game Freak is pushing the boundaries of what's possible with *Pokémon Legends: Arceus*. Selling over 6.5 million copies worldwide in the first week of sales solidified players' excitement. It's no understatement that the fanbase was eager to get their hands on a copy.

Pokémon Legends: Arceus can best be described as a semi-open world 3D RPG—not as open as *Breath of the Wild* as many believed. With a noticeable update to battle mechanics and overworld exploration, *Arceus* emphasizes adventure over becoming a champion. You will find yourself transported to the Sinnoh region of the past—known as Hisui in this era. Unlike other mainline games, the people of Jubilife Village are mostly afraid of Pokémon (they are “monsters” after all). Rather than setting off as a trainer, you are recruited as the latest Survey Corp member for the Pokémon research facility, where you'll find yourself tasked to observe, battle, and catch the powerful creatures to complete the region's first Pokedex. Your job isn't done after catching a Pokémon, your research will require you to catch many of the same species, use a move a certain number of times, and record how many times

you've given Pokémon food, just to name a few.

The biggest difference between *Arceus* and the other mainline games is that Pokémon encounters are now more dynamic and more realistic—feeling as Pokémon roam freely across five areas. You will need to strategically position yourself to catch wild Pokémon while they're not looking or dodge their attacks if they spot you. Yes, Pokémon can now attack you if you're not careful.

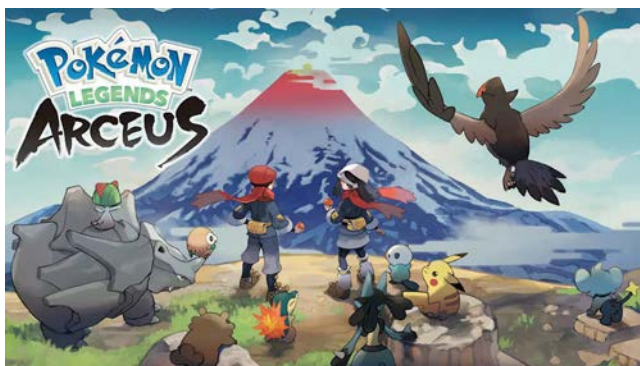
This game's biggest achievements are successfully making the battle system more engaging and the overworld more immersive thanks to plenty of areas to discover. With Pokémon out in the open, you can engage in battles as you



please. Although matches against NPCs are few and far between, battles get a changeup with new battle styles—strong style (more power but reduces speed) and agile style (increases speed, but decreases power), shaking up the turn-

of the *Wild*-like game, the background graphics are not up to the standards we've come to expect. The game does have a slew of choppy layers and frame-rate jitters, but luckily the battles and attacks are beautifully executed. I'm hopeful that *Arceus* will inspire future *Pokémon* games where one day we can have a true open-world

format with all the bells and whistles we adore from previous games. To even have this type of game is progress for the *Pokémon* series and luckily the graphics don't take away from the main objective: to research and catch the hun-



based system of games past. Aside from new battle mechanics, there's also the introduction of alpha Pokémon and frenzied Pokémon. The former being giant aggressive Pokémon and the latter being noble Pokémon who require special balms to quell their frenzy. Compared to previous titles, *Arceus*' battles are noticeably more difficult. You may find yourself against an alpha who's twice your level or surrounded by many Pokémon in special space-time rifts where stronger and rarer Pokémon gather.

While the gameplay has never been more fun, one area that has received much criticism is the game's looks. With so many hoping for a *Breath*

dreds of Pokémon species across the region. If you can look past the less-than-stellar environment (which is still beautiful by the way), you'll have a lot of fun discovering Pokémon. Even after fulfilling the main objective, you'll have many more hours to sink your teeth into with missions.

Pokémon Legends: Arceus, aside from a few hiccups, is taking a step in the right direction for the franchise. I applaud Game Freak for trying something new and I look forward to seeing how the next game explores what is possible for the series.

—Brianna Fox-Priest



PUBLISHER
Nintendo
DEVELOPER
Game Freak
SYSTEM(S)
Switch
RATING
E

Innovative kung-fu gameplay



PUBLISHER

Slapclap

DEVELOPER

Slapclap

SYSTEM(S)

PS4, PS5, PC

RATING

M

Sifu takes elements of the beat 'em up, fighting, and roguelike genres and mixes them up into a stylistic Kung Fu adventure. The result is a game that redefines what a beat 'em up can be but also stumbles a bit along the way.

You take the role of a young man seeking revenge against the five Kung Fu masters that murdered your father. Unfortunately, it's not as easy as just challenging them to a fight. Instead, you have to

make it through levels full of cronies and mini-bosses before you can take on the head honcho. Each master has their own theme, which is reflected throughout their stage. Fajar, the Botanist, can be found in a derelict and overgrown apartment complex where he runs his drug cartel, and Sean, the Fighter, has his base in a neon-tinged club. Unlike many beat 'em



Lost Ark

Free-to-play fun

Lost Ark isn't a new game. While it just got a western release, it launched in South Korea in 2019. So, unlike Amazon Games' other MMO, *New World*, *Lost Ark* comes with almost three years of content, which gives it a leg up.

Predictably, *Lost Ark* centers around a lost artifact called an Ark. The story has gods and demons vying for the seven pieces of this artifact, but it kind of flew right past me. While there's plenty of lore, it all felt pretty generic. Some characters break the monotony here and there, but the game doesn't really move past the tutorial stage until you acquire the ship, and the world opens up.

After getting access to the ship, you can travel the world of Arkesia, which leads to some wacky adven-



PUBLISHER

Smilegate

DEVELOPER

Smilegate, Amazon Game Studios

SYSTEM(S)

PC

RATING

M



ups, the environment continually varies and keeps things interesting by presenting new challenges.

Despite closely following the traditional beat-em-up format, *Sifu*'s combat style is more akin to a fighting game. There are over 150 unique attacks in the game, including kicks, punches, combos, and special attacks. In addition, each enemy (and the player) has a health gauge and a structural gauge. While the main goal is to deplete a foe's health, by filling their structural meter, you can break an enemy's guard, allowing you to use a finishing move for massive damage.

Throughout the game, you can earn XP to unlock new moves and abilities as well. Unfortunately, this is where things get a bit complicated. When a player unlocks an ability, it's only available during that playthrough. To permanently unlock them, players must purchase a skill six times. Unfortunately, this is a pretty big commitment, and it becomes a bit overwhelming to keep everything straight. Like any fighting game, *Sifu* has combos, special moves, cancels, and parries, and committing them to muscle memory is tough when you have to spend so much XP to unlock each one permanently.

One of the unique mechanics *Sifu* has is aging.



Aiding you in your journey is a magical talisman that revives you at the cost of accelerated aging. You start at 20 years old, and your first death will age you one year. Each new death will add an

extra year to that. So the second death will age you by two years, the third by three, and so on. Defeating certain enemies, completing a chapter, and spending XP at a shrine will lower this counter, but one wrong move, and you'll very quickly skip into middle age and right on to retirement years. Unfortunately, your character can't fight forever, and dying after reaching 70 will result in a game over.

There's not a lot of replay value past the ability to either kill or spare the bosses. Unlike most roguelikes, there's no randomization factor, so once you see all the endings, there's nothing to keep you coming back. The stages have branching paths and shortcuts to unlock, but they're mostly linear and all end in the same boss fight. Each stage is also pretty short, and the difficulty is what pads out the playtime.

Overall, *Sifu* is an exciting amalgamation of genres that provides an experience that players can't find elsewhere in gaming. Hopefully, with the success of this title, Sloclap will be able to realize its unique take on martial arts more fully. *Sifu* gets many things right, and I'd love to see its formula refined and used in a larger scale game.

—Brittany Vincent

tures. One location has robots and mechs, while another is Japanese-inspired and has you competing in a martial arts tournament. This is a mixed bag because the world design feels more like a theme park than a cohesive whole.

The world is really just a backdrop for the isometric action-RPG gameplay. *Lost Ark* plays out a lot like *Diablo* with vast swathes of enemies for you (and your friends) to kill. There are plenty of ruins to explore, castles to conquer, and foes to punish with the fantastical powers at your disposal.

There are 15 classes, some of which are (maddeningly) gender-locked. Each class has a list of unique skills that can be unlocked, which are then powered up by selecting buffs from the



builds, especially since each Tripod can also be ranked up.

Even though *Lost Ark* is an MMO, you can largely complete it solo. Some activities require a group (or at least highly suggest it), but it's kind of like *Final Fantasy XIV* in that it doesn't force participation in the vast majority of the game.

The big elephant in the room with *Lost Ark* is that it's a free-to-play title. The game never threw anything at me that made me feel like I had to spend real-world money. However, those who spend money can access items

that make their grind quicker. Additionally, there's a Crystalline Aura subscription that gives you bonuses like decreased transportation costs, faster build times, and a few other perks. The bad thing is that you have to trust that Amazon Games won't make changes that make the microtransactions essential to the experience.

So far, *Lost Ark* is one of the best free-to-play games of its kind. Fans of *Diablo* or CRPGs in general should love it. There's a ton of content here, and even though the story isn't award-winning, it's entertaining enough to hold the bones of the game together. So, if it sounds even a bit interesting, try it. After all, it's risk-free.

—Brittany Vincent

Tripod system. With this system, each skill has three tiers, and a player can only pick one upgrade from each tier to be active at a time. This can lead to some pretty complicated

Infernax

Someone's Quest

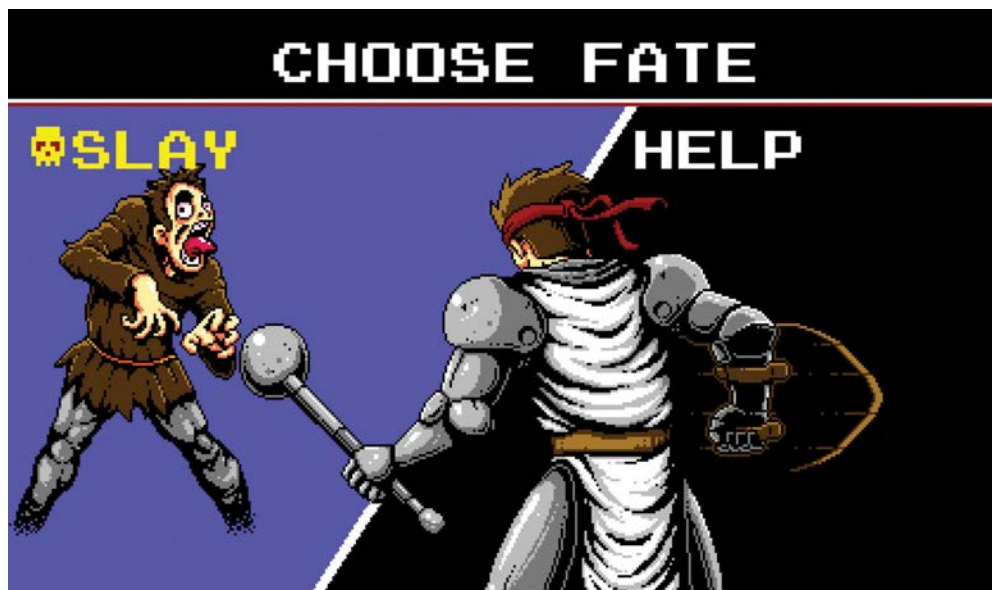


PUBLISHER
Yacht Club Games
DEVELOPER
Berzerk Studio
SYSTEM(S)
Switch, PS4, Xbox One, Xbox Series, PC
RATING
M

I have as much rose-tinted nostalgia for *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest* as the next person, but I hesitate to call it a "good game." The soundtrack is incredible, and the atmosphere is thick—especially for an NES game—but the esoteric hints and overall design were tailor-made for calling up the *Nintendo Power* tip line and ponying up a buck a minute in charges. *Infernax* dares to ask a bold question: What if *Simon's Quest* actually, for lack of bet-

ter terms, whipped ass?

That's pretty much *Infernax* in a nutshell. While Berzerk Studio's beautifully gory throw-back side-scroller certainly takes inspiration from other games of the past and present, it is most structurally reminiscent of the second *Castlevania* to grace Nintendo's original console. The story follows a knight who returns to his homeland to find it plagued with unholy magic.



Garden Story

Reach for grapeness!



PUBLISHER
Picogram
DEVELOPER
Rose City Games
SYSTEM(S)
Switch, PC, Mac
RATING
E10+

The wholesome and cozy categories of indie games are the strongest they have ever been in recent years, and thanks to the semi-annual Indie World showcase and online resources like Wholesome Games, more players have access to the latest and greatest the indie game scene has to offer. *Garden Story* is one of those highly sought-after gems of a game.

Embark on your adventure as Concord, the freshest grape off the vine crowned the Grove's newest Guardian. Though tiny, Concord has an island of fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, and frogs to protect from the nasty "rot" that is taking over their beloved garden patch. Here starts our protagonist's mission: take up garden tools to defend the Grove's inhabitants from the ever-encroaching rot and reunite the four regions and their communities of the island.

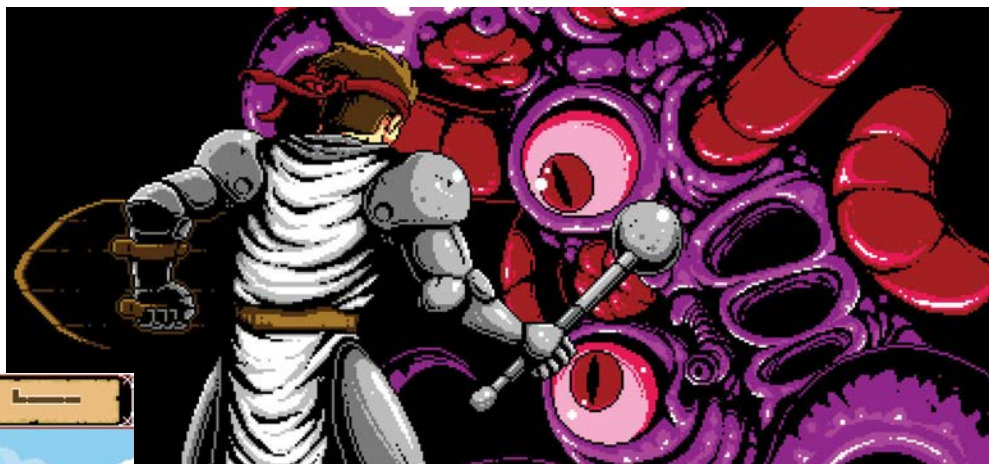
Garden Story is what you get when you cross a 2D top-down *Zelda*-like with a farming simu-

lator similar to *Story of Seasons* or *Stardew Valley*, and from it comes a beautiful world filled to the brim with quests. There's exploration, fighting monsters, fulfilling favors for the townsfolk, crafting, and dungeons that need a good cleaning (from all the rot and dungeon boss that is). It feels somewhat similar to



Thus, he sets off on a quest to uncover the mysteries of the curse, doing bloody battle with countless ghouls, ghosts, and goblins along the way. When I say *Infernax* is gory, I mean it. The dissonance of the sometimes-cute sprites and the over-the-top violence—especially in the gorgeously illustrated pixel art cutscenes—is downright hilarious. We're talkin' *Splatterhouse* levels of body horror here.

Speaking of those cutscenes, they come into play not just before bosses, but before key story beats that open up a simple set of choices. For



instance, the first one you run into happens just as a man is about to undergo a horrifying transformation into a zombie. You have the choice to help or slay him on the spot, and while slaying him will result in a hilariously brutal attack, you

might want to think twice about acting so hastily. This decision will actually affect your ending, believe it or not, as will the many other tough choices our hero must make along the way.

Infernax is a challenging game, but its power-up system and the frequent addition of new skills and magic abilities makes it totally fair. You never feel like you're powerless, and by the time you return to an area that handed you your ass the first time around, you'll be breezing through enemies with one-hit kills that used to take you

three or more to take down for good. Bosses are wonderfully designed, too. They're not overly complex, but they have some interesting patterns and moves, and of course you'll find that most of them are completely disgusting.

From the visuals to the earworm soundtrack and everything in between, *Infernax* is very much my type of indie game. With multiple endings and an engaging gameplay loop, there's plenty of replay value there, so do yourself a favor and take a brief reprieve from *Elden Ring* to go smash up monsters in a more bite-sized kingdom.

—Joseph Luster

another indie: *Turnip Boy Commits Tax Evasion*. Just with more areas to explore, substantially more gameplay, and more of a connection to the sim elements aforementioned.

Like other games of this genre, a lot of your time will be spent completing fetch quests before you can take on the dungeon boss of each area. The quests aren't particularly hard, made up of collecting resources, clearing an area of rot, or repairing dilapidated bridges and the like, but they do require a lot of backtracking, which unfortunately muddies your original objective. The most difficult part was actually remembering the task at hand, if you clear one, but forget the next you'll have to try and recall where the quest bulletin board is, leading to even more backtracking. Though eventually, you'll make enough coin from requests that you won't need to do as many as you progress through the game, unless you take on a new building project.

As you prove yourself as a reliable guardian, each town's mayor will ask for your help to clear dungeons. This is where the game feels more brutal than the rest. Getting through each dungeon's puzzles was a cinch, but the bosses crushed me every time. It could be that I didn't upgrade all my weapons (I lost track of where to do so), but I needed to rely



on the "perish prevention" setting after many attempts to take on the first boss. Attacks and dodge rolls felt slow and difficult at times making battles feel more chaotic than I anticipated. But, if you're up for a good challenge, this may

just be your speed.

Nicely fitting into the cozy category of games, the game includes elements that are synonymous with the genre: fishing (for resources), mining materials, farming, crafting, and buying hats and backpacks for Concord. Aside from the mainline quest, some of these tasks are only necessary for a few instances during the main quest; otherwise, it's left up to the player to continue repairing buildings, planting seeds, and decorating the villages after completing the main story. I would have liked to see a better integration of the sim elements and main quest to balance out the gameplay, but overall, the main story roughly takes about 15 hours to complete (which is definitely on the higher end for indie games!), and if you want to customize the island there are plenty more hours to sink your teeth into.

Garden Story is a delightfully wholesome game with a gorgeous pixelated overworld, endearing story, and adorable soundtrack by Graham Nesbitt. If you're looking to broaden your horizons and dive into the world of chill indie games, this is a good place to start your adventure.

—Brianna Fox-Priest

Keep it Safe

Last issue we discussed the importance of being aware of your mental health while cosplaying. It can be difficult to look at yourself and identify your own problematic or toxic thinking; but it can be equally difficult to identify those negative influences within our social groups. In cosplay, that can mean the friends you cosplay with or the professionals you work with. Overall, it's important to surround yourself with positive influences and put your mental health first.

Working with professionals within the cosplay community can come in the form of collaborating with commissioners, photographers or even companies. When working with a commissioner, researching the reputation of the person you hire can prevent you from accidentally working with a difficult person, thus creating huge headaches for yourself. Ask peers for recommendations and look for commissioners who stick to deadlines and can provide you with updates if necessary.

When shooting with cosplay photographers, this research is extremely important, not just for financial reasons but safety wise. Sadly, there have been incidences where photographers have taken advantage of their position and used it to pressure cosplayers into photographs they aren't comfortable with, sharing personal photos and even worse. Because of this, your safety is priority #1. Research photographers beforehand, bring a friend with you to shoots (especially your first one) and stay aware of how you're feeling during the shoot. If you ever feel uncomfortable, end the shoot, and get to safety.

Mental health in terms of working with companies or sponsors is ensuring that you aren't taking on more than you can do as well as making sure you are being adequately compensated for your work AND time. While some cosplayers feel they work best under pressure, con crunch can impact mental health, sleep, and even physical health. That feeling is amplified when you're hired to produce something for someone else by a deadline. It is perfectly alright to pass up an offer if you need to, in order to prioritize your mental health. Opportunities come and go but exhausting yourself or possibly neglecting other priorities for another can potentially leave you feeling burnout.

It's one thing to walk away from a working relationship that's negatively affecting you but it's another to identify and leave relationships with friends. Toxic traits in friend groups can come in the form of jealousy, gossip, negative comments rather than support or being taken advantage of. Cosplaying with friends should be something fun and cooperative. Everyone should be doing an equal amount of work, either working on their own cosplays or if splitting up work. You should all be there to support one another.

This support extends from support with physical cosplay work to emotional support. Cosplay friends should be raising you up, not knocking you down. Negative comments from friends, whether aimed at yourself or others, are an automatic red flag for a toxic relationship. Someone who is constantly jealous of or gossiping about others, can bring these negative feelings into your relationship. Try and talk to your friend about why they have these feelings and maybe you can help them become a more positive person themselves. If not, have the courage to choose to surround yourself with positivity rather than negativity.

Always choose the path that makes you happy and stay aware enough to identify the relationships, professional or personal, that keep you from that goal.

Ani-Mia links

Facebook: www.facebook.com/Animia.cosplay

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Brian Ngai
Photography



SonSon
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Richard Doyle
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First Glance Photography



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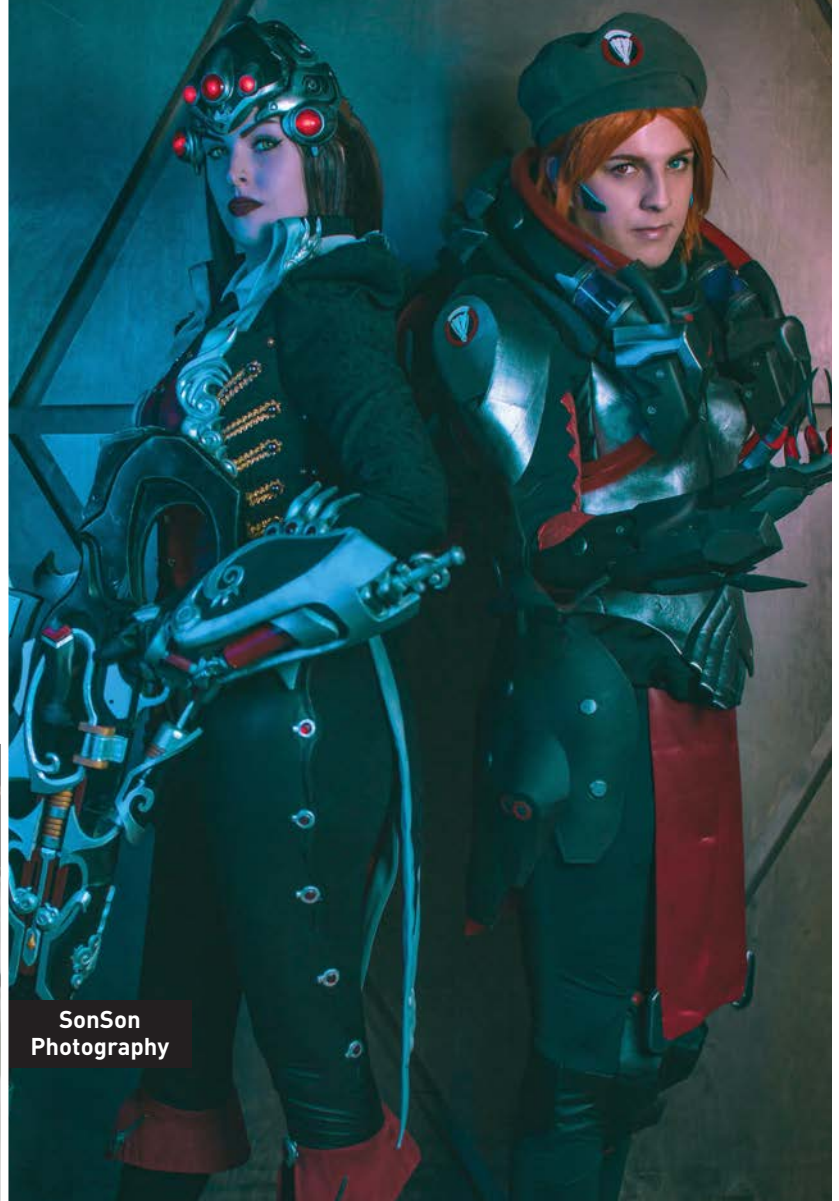
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First Glance Photography



First Glance Photography



Brian Ngai Photography

BELLE of the Ball

Composer Taisei Iwasaki Talks Music and Creativity

Taisei Iwasaki is the lead composer and arranger on the soundtracks for BELLE, a visually stunning new film with beautiful music from Mamoru Hosoda. With the movie now available to audiences globally, Iwasaki spoke to Otaku USA about his background in music, his creative process, and his involvement with the English version of the songs.



Otaku USA: Please tell us a bit about yourself and your background in music.

Taisei Iwasaki: I love films and music, and I majored in screenwriting in college. My main activity as a composer is to create soundtracks for films that combine both. My mother was a piano teacher, so I had a lot of opportunities to experience music from a young age.

What was your creative process in working on the music for *BELLE*?

First, I read the script and storyboard, had a long meeting with Hosoda-san to decide on the direction of music, and then started composing. And then I made the concept of a "composer village" and invited my composer friends to collaborate on compositions. The way that the composers shared their motifs directly with each other was unique to this work.

What was it like working with Mamoru Hosoda?

It was very exciting. Director Hosoda never treated us as just another production department but allowed us to truly collaborate. We respected each other's opinions and were able to work together until the very last note.

How were you involved in supervising the English dub of the music?

We were part of the team that made the English version, and we actually recorded the vocals in NYC and did the mixing too. This time I told them that I wanted to make an original English version, not just an English translation, and they accepted. So, my personal impression is that I was able to make an English original, not an English Dub. It was a very fortunate experience.



Is there anything else you'd like your overseas fans to know?

As I mentioned above, we're trying to localize the music and the lyrics specific to each country as much as possible in the hopes that overseas fans will enjoy this film as much as Japanese fans do.

Danica Davidson is the author of the best-selling *Manga Art for Beginners* with artist Melanie Westin, and its sequel, *Manga Art for Intermediates*, with professional Japanese mangaka Rena Saiya. Check out her other comics and books at www.danicadavidson.com.

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